



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>

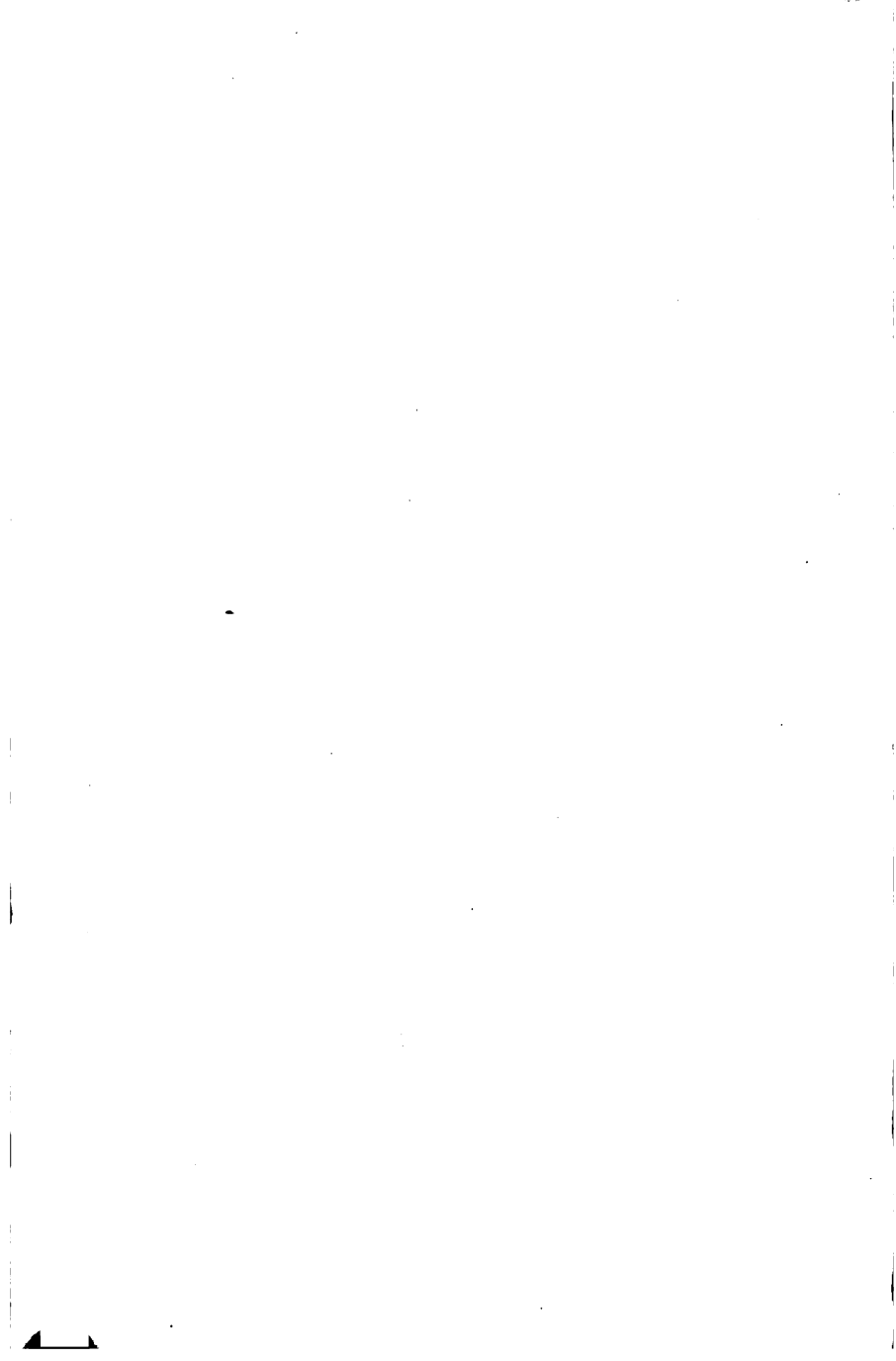
A 512903



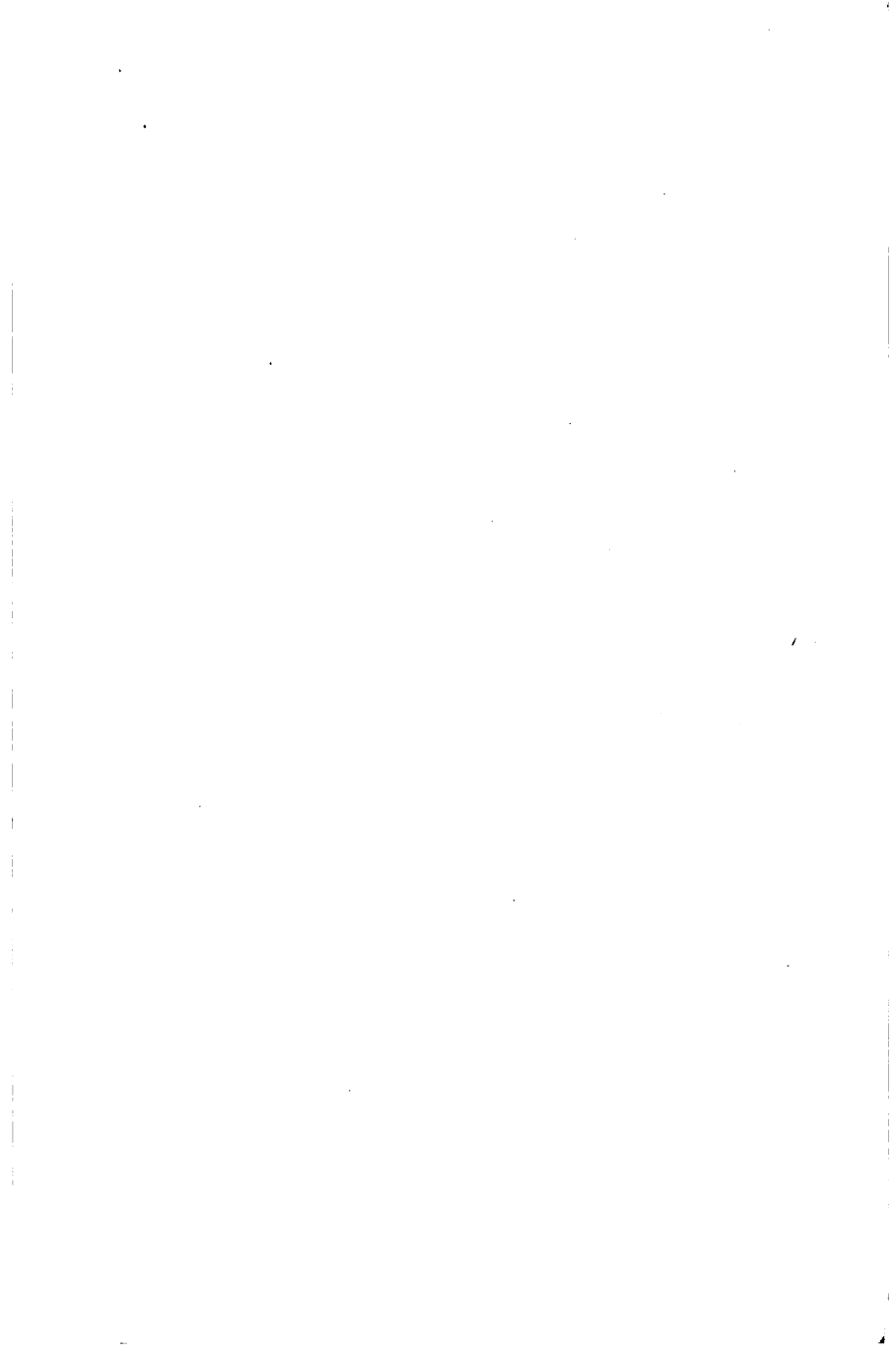
LIBRARY

828

E5325







"My lord, a prize, a prize!"— Henry VI.

SYLVIA, the heroine of this story, being described as "THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN EUROPE," twelve artists, known for their types of beautiful women, were invited each to make a drawing expressing a conception of the character. Their pictures are all reproduced as illustrations in the book. Readers are now invited to choose from among the pictures the one which, in their judgment, represents the most beautiful woman, and to indicate the order in which they think all the others should rank. A PRIZE OF FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS (\$500.00) will be given by the publishers to the person whose list comes nearest to the choice of the majority in accordance with the following plan of scoring by points:—

THE PLAN.

The picture chosen by the greatest number as the most beautiful woman will give to each person naming that picture as the best a credit of twelve (12) points in the score. The picture chosen as the second best by the greatest number will give to each person naming it as the second choice a credit of eleven (11) points. The third choice will carry a credit of ten (10) points, and so on.

On this plan the highest possible score would be:

$$12 + 11 + 10 + 9 + 8 + 7 + 6 + 5 + 4 + 3 + 2 + 1 = 78.$$

Other scores than the highest might be made up as follows: Suppose Mr. A names the first seven according to the exact order determined by the choice of the greatest number, but is wrong in all the others, his score would be as given below. Miss C, who gets the first three and the last two wrong, the others right, would score as indicated:—

MR. A'S SCORE.		MISS C'S SCORE.	
<i>Number.</i>	<i>Points.</i>	<i>Number.</i>	<i>Points.</i>
1	12	1	0
2	11	2	0
3	10	3	0
4	9	4	9
5	8	5	8
6	7	6	7
7	6	7	6
8	0	8	5
9	0	9	4
10	0	10	3
11	0	11	0
12	0	12	0
Total score 63		Total score 42	

Any person may send any number of votes; but each vote must be on the coupon provided in the book, and each coupon must be fully made out in accordance with the directions below.

Under this plan it is unlikely that the prize will be divided; but, if it happens that there should be a tie on the highest score, then the prize will be equally divided among the persons making this score.

All votes must be received by Small, Maynard & Company not later than June 1, 1902, on which date the contest will close.

DIRECTIONS.

After you have read the story, fill out the coupon on the page opposite to this, placing the figure 1 in the little square opposite the name of the artist whose picture, in your judgment, represents the most beautiful woman. Place the figure 2 similarly opposite the name of the artist whose picture is your second choice, and so on through the entire twelve.

Write your name and address plainly, being careful to give number and full name of street, if in a city, or name of county, if in a small town.

Send all coupons to the publishers:

SMALL, MAYNARD & COMPANY, BOSTON.

"Offer to choose, and choose the right."

— Merchant of Venice.

a,

SYLVIA PRIZE COUPON

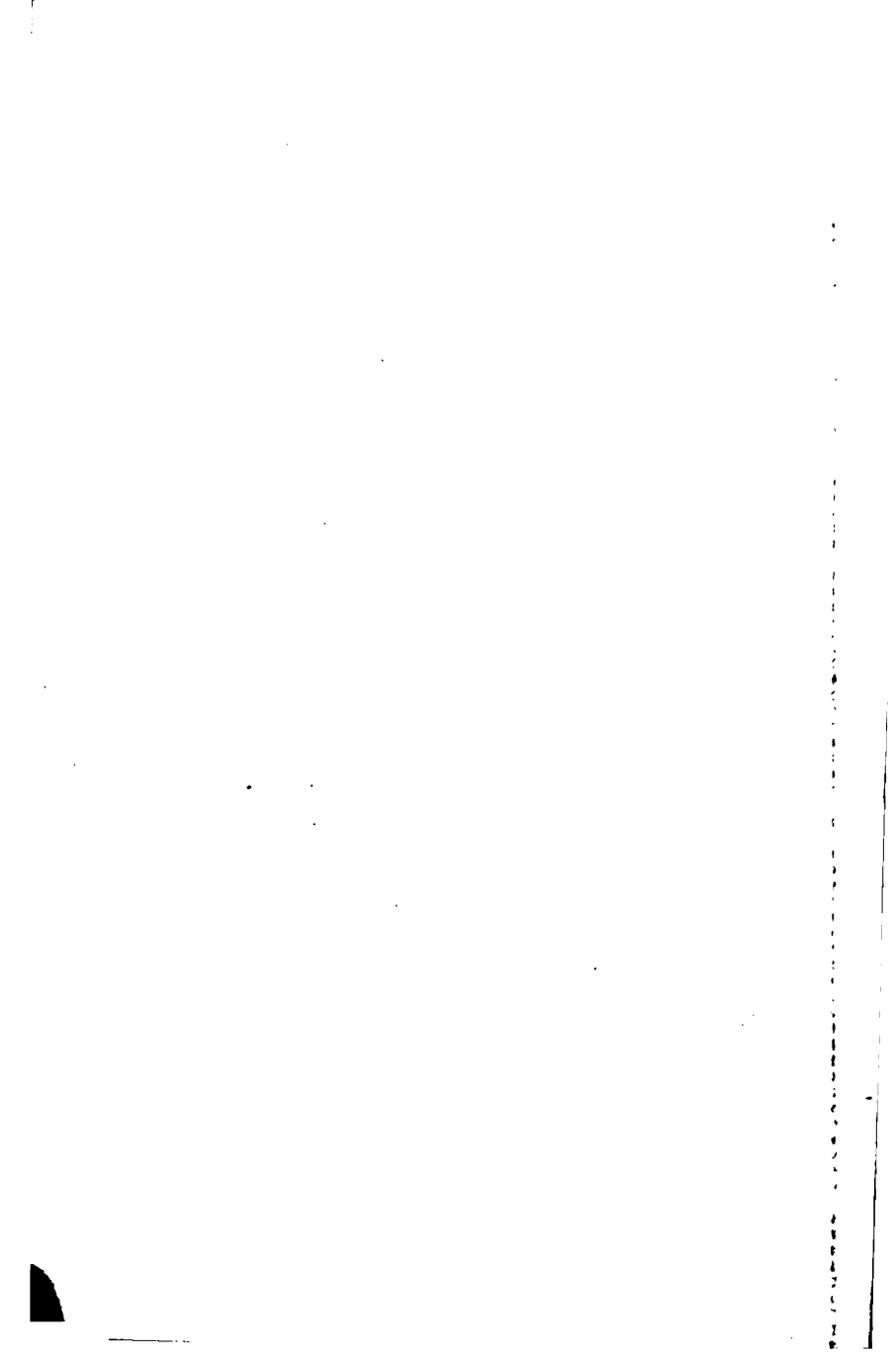
OF the pictures of SYLVIA reproduced herein, my choice, as representing the most beautiful woman, is in the order indicated by the numbers (1, 2, 3, etc.) which I set down in the squares opposite the names of the artists, as follows:

ALBERT D. BLASHFIELD	
CARLE J. BLENNER	
J. WELLS CHAMPNEY	
HOWARD CHANDLER CHRISTY	
LOUISE COX	
JOSEPH DE CAMP	
JOHN ELLIOTT	
C. ALLAN GILBERT	
ALBERT HERTER	
HENRY HUTT	
ALICE BARBER STEPHENS	
A. B. WENZELL	

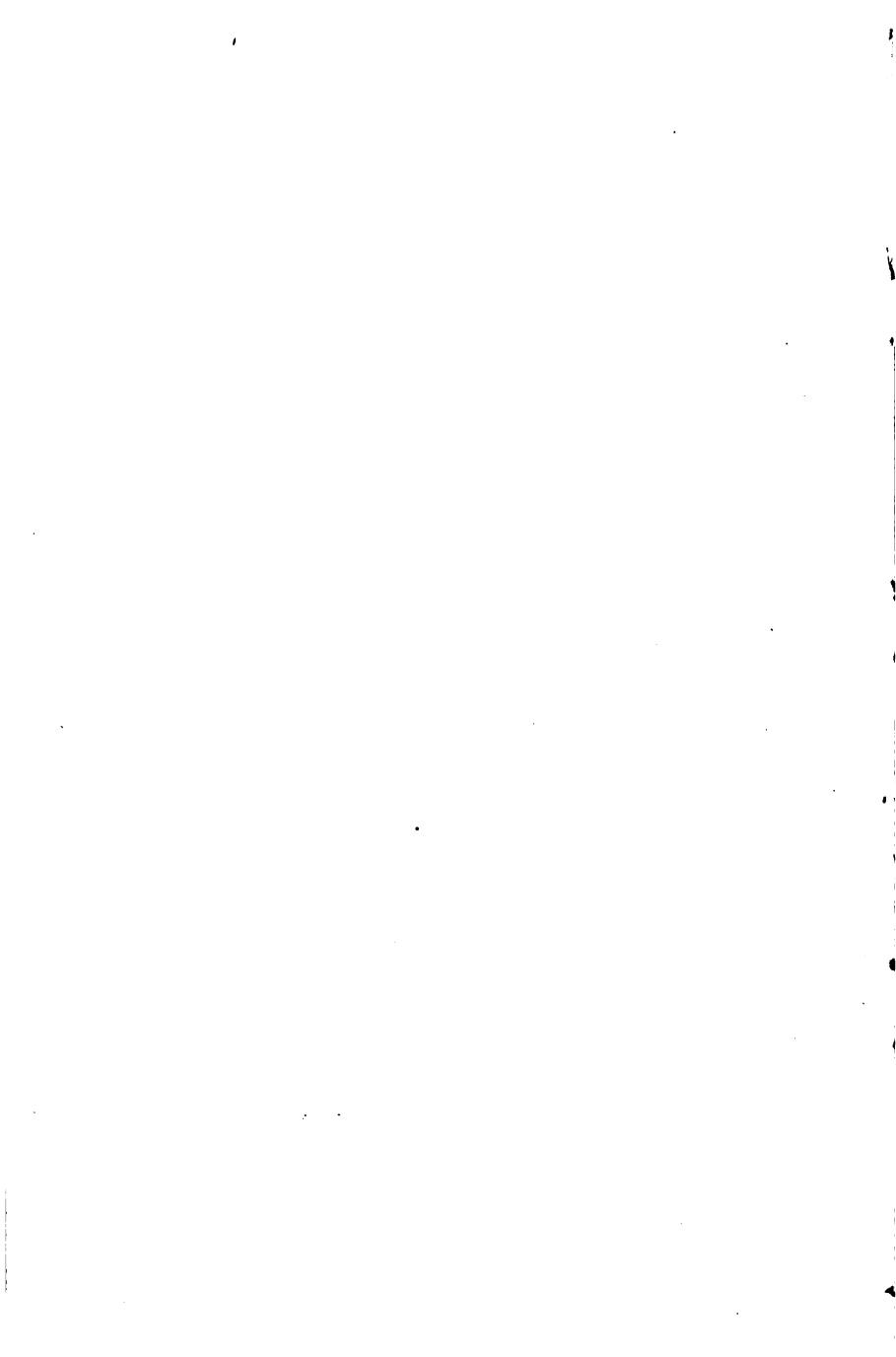
My Name is.....

Address.....

DETACH THIS COUPON, and mail it, filled out as directed, in time to be delivered not later than June 1, 1902, to
SMALL, MAYNARD & COMPANY, Publishers, BOSTON







SYLVIA

The Story of an American Countess

SYLVIA

The STORY *of an*
AMERICAN COUNTESS

By
Evalyn Emerson



Boston
Small, Maynard & Company
1901

*Copyright, 1901, by
Small, Maynard & Company
(Incorporated)*

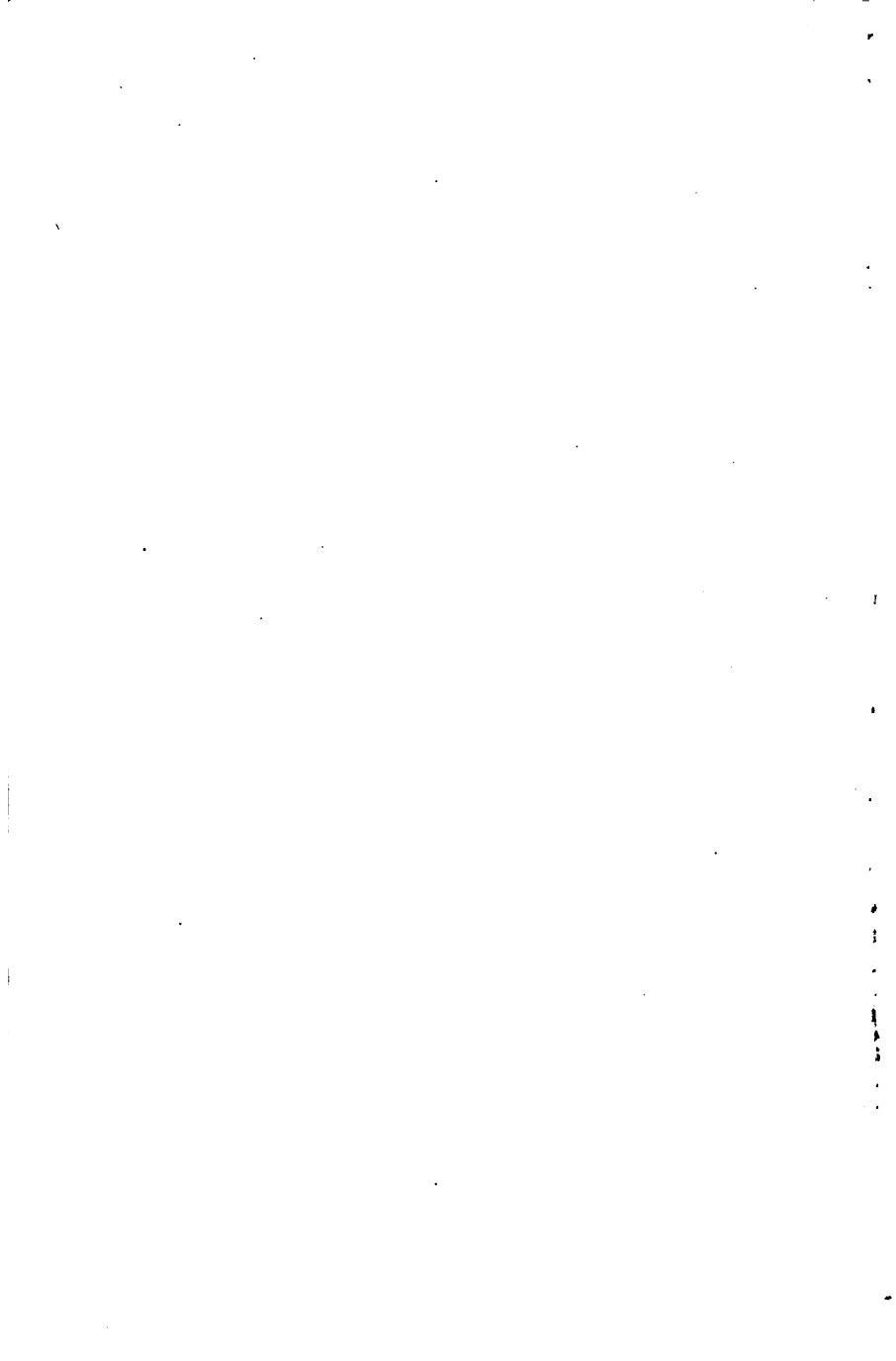
Entered at Stationers' Hall

*Press of George H. Ellis
Boston, U.S.A.*

TO MY DEAREST FRIEND
MY MOTHER

① M

143087





SYLVIA by
Joseph De Camp
Copyright, 1901, by Small, Maynard & Company



1001

1. 2. 3. 4.



SYLVIA by
C. Allan Gilbert

Copyright, 1901, by Small, Maynard & Company

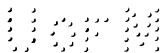


1901



SYLVIA by
A. B. Wenzell

Copyright, 1901, by Small, Maynard & Company



1901



SYLVIA by
J. Wells Champney
Copyright, 1901, by Small, Maynard & Company

100



SYLVIA by
Albert Herter

Copyright, 1901, by Small, Maynard & Company



1101



Howard Chandler Christy 1901

SYLVIA by
Howard Chandler Christy
Copyright, 1901, by Small, Maynard & Company

100



SYLVIA by
Henry Hutt

Copyright, 1901, by Small, Maynard & Company

1901



SYLVIA by
John Elliott
Copyright, 1901, by John Elliott

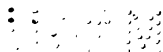
Digitized by Google

2000



SYLVIA by
Louise Cox

Copyright, 1901, by Small, Maynard & Company



1950



SYLVIA by
Carl J. Blenner
Copyright, 1901, by Small, Maynard & Company

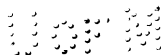


1901

S Y L V I A

as portrayed by

ALBERT D. BLASHFIELD, CARLE J. BLENNER, J. WELLS
CHAMPNEY, HOWARD CHANDLER CHRISTY,
LOUISE COX, JOSEPH DE CAMP, JOHN ELLIOTT,
C. ALLAN GILBERT, ALBERT HERTER, HENRY HUTT,
ALICE BARBER STEPHENS, A. B. WENZELL

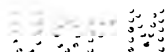


1970



SYLVIA by
Alice Barber Stephens

Copyright, 1901, by Small, Maynard & Company



#you



SYLVIA by
Albert D. Blashfield

Copyright, 1901, by Small, Maynard & Company

UOPI

1980
1981
1982
1983
1984
1985
1986
1987
1988
1989
1990
1991
1992
1993
1994
1995
1996
1997
1998
1999
2000
2001
2002
2003
2004
2005
2006
2007
2008
2009
2010
2011
2012
2013
2014
2015
2016
2017
2018
2019
2020
2021
2022
2023
2024
2025

SYLVIA : THE STORY OF AN AMERICAN COUNTESS

CHAPTER I

Two gentlemen were seated at a small table before the Café Florian in the Piazza San Marco. They had met in Venice but that same afternoon. Each was tall, broad-shouldered, smooth-faced, well-groomed—the finest type of the best American young men. They bore the indescribable, but unmistakable, hallmark of New York. New Yorkers they were, and friends of old and long standing, Eric Fielding and Philip Monroe.

“If we had only known sooner of our common desire for a glimpse of Italy, we might have arranged to come together,” said Eric.

“But now that we have met, why not continue together?” asked Philip.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

“ I should like nothing better, but I fear that it is impossible, as I sail for home from Genoa the day after to-morrow.”

“ The day after to-morrow? That’s hard luck. Why do you go back so soon? Stay here, and I will show you the most beautiful woman in Europe.”

As he spoke, his eyes strayed toward the open Square, and catching sight of a party of young people who stood there, he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

“ By Jove, Eric, speaking of angels, there she is now! ”

“ The most beautiful woman in Europe? ” asked Eric, smiling at the enthusiasm expressed in his friend’s face.

“ Yes. Look, she stands out there, a little apart from the others, the girl with the bright hair.”

Eric turned leisurely, following his friend’s gaze. But his amusement at Philip’s enthusiasm ceased as he looked at the girl. He drew

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

in his breath quickly, and half arose, in his sudden admiration.

“Who is she?” he asked, after a moment’s silence.

Philip glanced at him quickly; it was now his turn to be amused.

“I knew you would be interested if you saw her,” he said.

Eric forgot his usually calm indifference when speaking of a girl. He was, for the first time in his life, anxious to be told something about one.

“I have never met her,” said Philip. “I know no one here to introduce me. But a friend of mine, an artist, told me that she is a French Countess, visiting some friends at one of the palaces near our hotel on the Grand Canal. My friend is wild over her. You know him, by the way—Leigh Dunlop—he lived in New York before he came abroad to study. I met him here only a few days ago, and he began almost immediately to sing her

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

praises, and when I saw her I did not blame him. We have spent most of our time in devising means of discovering where she would be each day, so that we could watch her unobserved, from a safe distance. We have seen her twice here in the Square, once at the Doge's Palace, and several times in a gondola in the evening. We are in luck this afternoon. She is better worth seeing than anything in Europe. Heavens! one would give his soul just for a chance to win a smile from her. Look at her now as she stands feeding those pigeons; did you ever see anything so perfect?"

"She seems too perfect to be real," said Eric in a low voice.

"Ah, my friend," exclaimed Philip, "if you will only stay longer, you will catch the fever too. You can join forces with Leigh and me, and we three will worship her from afar. Won't you give up your passage and stay?"

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

Eric arose abruptly and turned his back on the gay scene in the Square.

“Absurd, Philip, he said with a short laugh. “My ship sails day after to-morrow, and I sail with her, in spite of all ‘the most beautiful women in Europe.’” His voice softened unconsciously a little at the last of this sentence, despite his attempted gaiety. “Come,” he said, “let us go find our gondola. I have a mind for a drift down the Grand Canal before dinner.”

But Philip did not seem to hear him. His eyes and thoughts were still on the girl. She had left the pigeons and was coming with her friends toward the Arcade, to join the throng that was enjoying ices at the cafés.

“She is coming here—to this very café, Eric. I knew she would come to this one, if she appeared this afternoon, for here is where we found her before.”

“Then there is all the more reason to leave,” said Eric. “We cannot sit here and watch

SÝLVIA : *The* STORY of

her. If you have done it before, you will be sure to be observed either by her or one of her friends. Come, man, before you make a fool of yourself."

Philip smiled a little, in acknowledgment that Eric was right. He arose, and they went as quickly as possible through the throng toward the other end of the Square where their gondola awaited them.

"But you must admit," said Philip, as they settled back in the luxurious cushions of the craft, "that she is marvellously beautiful, and that your hurrying me away was not indifference to her charms, but merely fear that you might become as enthusiastic as Leigh and I, if you saw much more of her."

"I admit nothing," said Eric.

"I am willing to wager," went on Philip, "that three-quarters of the men who are in love with her—and there are enough of them too—fell in love at first sight. Her beauty is not only greater than that of other girls, but

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

it is rare in that it holds infinite possibilities for one's imagination. You feel so sure that she is what she seems. That girl has a soul as beautiful as her face."

"I was not near enough to see the soul," said Eric.

Philip looked at him a trifle irritated.

"Come, now, don't ridicule me. You know that you admire her. No man who is a man could help it. You will not admit it, and you try to laugh it off, but I know how you are hit. I know that you will think of her for many a day, even if you do not see her again."

Eric was silent. Philip had a way of saying things that was very convincing. And Eric was wondering if he was really right this time. What if he should remain and see her again, perhaps meet her and become as fascinated as the other men seemed to be? They drew up to the hotel, and he jumped quickly out to the steps.

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

"No, that is impossible," he said to himself, "it would be madness." Just before dinner, Leigh Dunlop joined them, and the three men dined together. When dinner was over and they had gone out on one of the balconies overlooking the Grand Canal, to smoke their cigars, Leigh exclaimed:

"By Jove, Philip, meeting Eric, and talking over old times, made me almost forget to tell you the good news. I have met *her!*"

"The Countess?" cried Philip.

"Yes, this afternoon in the Piazza. I ran across Dick Ames, and I asked him where he was going. He said he had just caught sight of some friends at Florian's, and was going to speak to them. He told me to come along, and imagine my feelings when I discovered he was taking me straight to our Countess! He introduced me to her—I was so amazed I nearly forgot my good manners. I could only stand and gaze at her like an idiot. She was with her aunt, a Venetian Baroness, and some

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

friends who are visiting the Baroness. When we left them, Dick told me all about her. It seems that she is an Italian Countess, not French, and she lives in Nice. Her aunt, the Baroness, lives with her, as her parents are dead. She has any amount of money, and is all the rage in Nice. When Dick was there, he attended several balls at her house, and is on very friendly terms with her and the Baroness. You remember, he has lived in Italy five years, and through Lord Raleigh, who is a cousin of his, he has met some of the best people in Italy and throughout Europe."

"He is in luck," said Philip.

"And so am I to have met her, and so will you be to-morrow night, for I told Dick he must take us there. The Baroness gives a large reception, and Dick said he thought he could get cards for us. What do you think of that?"

"It is magnificent," said Philip.

"And you will want to come too, won't you,"

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

Eric? I am sure that he can get a card for you also," said Leigh.

"Thank you," said Eric, "I appreciate your offer, but I sail for home on Wednesday."

"Home? Oh, yes, of course—Edith!"

"Edith!" exclaimed Philip. "What of her?"

"Hadn't you heard that Eric is engaged to her?"

Philip looked quickly at Eric.

"No, is that true? Why, my congratulations, old man. I wonder how it has happened that I have not heard. I see now why we cannot persuade you to stay longer—even to meet the beautiful Countess. Hullo! there she is again!"

The eyes of the others instinctively followed his gaze, down upon the many gondolas passing to and fro on the canal.

"Yes," said Leigh, "there she is in the gondola just opposite, with the Baroness and two men."

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

Eric looked down, watching her intently, as the boat drifted past. A strange thrill came over him; perhaps it was merely the influence of the two men who were with him, but he seemed to forget everything else in the world but the beautiful face of the girl so near him. The brilliant lights from the hotel fell on the canal, and made the scene as bright as daylight. In a moment it was over, the gondola glided past into the shadows beyond; but the remembrance of her indescribable charm remained so vivid, that none of the three men spoke for some time.

CHAPTER II.

ONE rainy afternoon, about a week later, Philip was standing at the window in his room at the hotel, looking idly out. He felt restless and depressed, longing for something, he hardly knew what, and yet down deep, he dimly understood his longing, but it seemed hopelessly unattainable. He had been alone all day. Leigh had gone out somewhere early in the morning, and Philip had called at Dick's hotel only to find him out. He had desolately returned to his own hotel, trying to pass the time in reading. But his thoughts wandered from his book and he found himself gazing blankly at the pages, or jumping up and striding about the room, or peering out of the window. Now he turned and went back to the table, throwing himself dejectedly into a great easy chair. He made no further pretence of reading, but rested his elbows on the table, thinking. So intent was he on his

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

thoughts, that he did not hear a knock at the door, nor that the handle turned and a man slowly entered. It was Dick, who stood quietly surveying him a moment. Then he gave a little low whistle and came forward.

“‘In Venice the Golden to dream—to dream!’ Dreams are all very well in their way, old man,” said Dick laughing, “but take care you do not count on their proving true.”

“Dick!” exclaimed Philip. “Thank Heaven you have come! Such a day to spend utterly alone! Where have you been, old chap?”

“Oh!” said Dick, slowly helping himself to a cigar and sitting down comfortably, “since luncheon I have been writing letters, and this morning—*this morning*—I—called—on—the—Countess!”

He watched Philip in an amused way as he said this. Philip involuntarily gave a little start.

“In the morning!” he said, as if to himself.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

“ Why; may I not enjoy a chat with her in the morning, when you monopolised her last evening? ”

“ I? ”

“ Why, yes, when we called. Did I not beguile the duenna-Baroness, so that you might bask in the smiles of the charming Countess? And then that afternoon at the Square, the day after the reception, did I not then, also, talk to the aunt? Oh, I say, old fellow, you do not half appreciate my sacrifices on the altar of friendship. And at the reception too—when you first met her—she talked to you for a long time, and I was forgotten.”

“ A long time! ” said Philip. “ For just about one minute, and last night you would only stay half an hour, and at the Square, we were hardly more than seated when they had to return home.”

“ But we were there a whole hour at the least.”

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“ Even so,—an hour, half an hour, and one moment, in a whole week!”

Dick was silent a moment. He did not laugh as was his wont.

“ I fear that you have it badly, Philip.”

“ And haven’t you too?” replied Philip jealously.

“ I? Never!” exclaimed Dick. “ Heaven forbid! I am too old, and too wise, to be in love.”

“ Then why do you go to see her in the mornings? Why do you haunt the place? Why are you there morning, noon and night, and yet have taken me but twice?”

“ I admit that she is attractive,” said Dick provokingly, “ and I enjoy her society, I really think, better than that of any other woman in Venice. Behold the reason that takes me there so often. But do not reproach me for not taking you oftener, O, ungrateful mortal! I have done so as much as I felt that I could at first. Wait until you know her better, then

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

you can go as often, yea, even more often than I do."

"I do believe you are laughing at me," said Philip. "You can but see that I am far gone, and if you are not in love yourself, you need not laugh at a fellow who is."

"No," said Dick seriously, "I am not laughing at you. I can but be amused, for you are so tremendously in earnest, and she has taken you more by storm than she has any of her other admirers. And yet, do you know, I like to see it. A man who is in love is an interesting study to his fellowmen."

"I do not understand how you can know her and not love her," said Philip.

"In the first place, as I told you, I am too old to let myself go. In the second place, I find the position of Sylvia's friend far too attractive for me to risk changing it for the rôle of suitor. I am more like an elder brother, and, in a small way, adviser. She is

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

good enough to confide some of her secrets to me, and occasionally ask my advice."

Philip sat silent, and after a few moments Dick continued: "Philip, would you like to marry the Countess?"

"Great Heavens, haven't I just told you that I adore her?"

"Then why don't you ask her to marry you?"

"I intend to—some day."

"But I mean now, at once. 'Some day.' may be too late."

"What do you mean? She is not thinking of marrying?"

"Not exactly thinking of it, and yet she may decide to marry. The fact is, her aunt is determined that she shall accept an English duke. And I have a sneaking fear that the Baroness may win, if something is not done to block her. If you will step in, make Sylvia love you—you know she always likes Ameri-

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

cans—who knows? you might be able to cut the duke out.”

“By Jove, I’ll try. It seems to me like striving for the moon, but I love her.”

“True,” said Dick. “But we have no time to waste, let us begin our campaign at once. I thought of you this morning when I was with her, so I enquired if she was to be at home and disengaged this evening. She said that her aunt was going to a ball, but that she was not going. I believe the duke asked if he might accompany them, and so she refused. Then I asked if we might call so soon again, and she said certainly. So there you are.”

“Dick, you’re a trump!”

“Don’t thank me,” said Dick, “I believe I am doing as much for her as I am for you, in helping along your suit, for I am fond of the girl—in a brotherly way—and I should like to see her happily married to a good, honest fellow like you. To confess the truth, I am afraid of the Baroness. She is a good

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

woman in her way, but she is worldly and scheming; she wants Sylvia to marry a title, not a man. She is clever, and would go to almost any honest ends—and what ends would not an ambitious woman consider honest?—to persuade Sylvia that it is her duty to obey.”

“But what of the duke?” asked Philip. “Perhaps the Countess loves him? If so——”

“The duke,” interrupted Dick, “is like Shakespeare’s French lord, Monsieur Le Bon, ‘Heaven made him, therefore let him pass for a man.’ There is no danger of Sylvia’s heart being affected by him. It is merely her sense of duty that I fear. Her aunt has been most kind to her, entirely devoted, ever since her father’s death, three years ago, and Sylvia, who is grateful and conscientious, may think she ought to please her aunt. But if she could only fall in love with a man like you, a plain, honest gentleman, with plenty of brains, and a big loving heart to make a woman happy, not forgetting a fortune left by a de-

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

voted father, which can be used for her comfort. Ah, lucky dog! why was I not left a million or two, instead of having to work and work in order to be able to put butter on my bread? But, as I was saying, if Sylvia should fall in love with such a man as you, she would never think that she must marry to please her aunt; she would marry you, and all would be well."

"God grant it," said Philip earnestly.

A few hours later, the two friends found themselves in the reception room of the Baroness' palace, waiting while the footman took their cards to the Countess. The large rooms of the lower floor opened into each other, and at the end of the long suite could be seen a large court filled with flowers, palms and other tropical plants. From this court came softly the strains of a harp.

"It is not the Countess, is it?" said Philip.

"No," answered Dick, "she does not play the harp, but the violin! Ah, you should hear

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

her play if you want to feel yourself in Heaven."

A merry peal of girlish laughter greeted this remark.

"You grow poetical, my friend," said the Countess, coming toward them. "You see I came down more promptly than you thought, and I could not help overhearing that pretty speech. But perhaps you heard me coming and had it all prepared?"

"Most cruel maiden," said Dick, bowing gracefully over the hand she offered him, "to accuse *me* of flattery. You know I meant every word—in fact more, that I may not express."

The Countess made no reply save another rippling laugh. She never knew whether or not to take Dick seriously. He was always making pretty speeches to her which she invariably met with a laugh, and this seemed to please him. As a matter of fact, he often laid these verbal traps in order to provoke her

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

girlish merriment, although underneath all he said there ran a current of sincerity.

“ Good-evening, Mr. Monroe,” said the Countess, turning to shake hands with Philip. “ I am glad you wanted to come again to-night. Americans are always very welcome. I love to talk of my country, for you know, I feel as if it was much more my country than Italy is.”

“ I am glad of that,” said Philip delightedly, for he also was an enthusiastic American.

“ Yes,” went on Sylvia, “ I was born in the United States and lived there until four years ago. Certainly I love Italy, dear, old, sunny Italy! But America—ah, that is where my heart is!”

“ Your heart?” exclaimed Philip, more to himself than to her, but Sylvia heard him.

“ Yes, my heart,” she said, laughing.

“ *A propos*, not at all of hearts,” said Dick. “ I want to know if you will not play for us? It is ever so long since I have heard you, and

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

Philip, who has not had that joy, has not really lived."

"Then I must not keep him from living any longer," said Sylvia. "Pardon me while I go for my violin."

"What a delicious laugh she has," said Philip when she had gone.

"Yes," answered Dick, "she is always merry. We men do our best to amuse her in order to hear her laugh—it is such an infectious one, it drives away a fellow's blues only to hear her. One always finds her so joyous, as if the mere fact that she is young and beautiful makes her glad. And why shouldn't it? But now listen"—he spoke in a low, hurried tone—"I have everything planned. You did not think I came here with you this evening to sit about as a sort of a chaperon to your love-making? No, I will leave you alone in a little while, and my excuse will be this: after Sylvia plays for us, she will ask me to play—it will be like candlelight after sunlight,—however,

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

I shall do it. I have done it before, as I enjoy playing, myself, in a small way. And as I can play only with notes, and like to have an accompanist, I shall go out into the court where you hear that harpist, and he and I will absorb ourselves in each other, as we often do when I come here—and lo, the field is yours!”

Before Philip had time to reply, they heard the light footfall of the Countess coming down the stairs, whereupon Dick fell to discoursing learnedly on the origin of the violin.

CHAPTER III

THE charmed silence which followed the last lingering notes from Sylvia's bow was broken by the fair musician herself, who exclaimed: "It is your turn now, Dick; I want to hear some playing beside my own. Here is some of your music, please play for me."

Protesting with perfect sincerity his inability to give any such pleasure as he had just experienced, Dick acquiesced in her desire, and at the same time carried out his own plan, by joining the harpist in the inner court, leaving Philip and Sylvia alone. Philip had neither moved nor spoken during this time. Sylvia's marvellous playing seemed to have left him fairly entranced. As is so often the case with natures intensely musical, yet lacking utterly the power of expression, music with him was a passion which was almost a pain, he felt and loved so deeply the art for which he had no gift of expression. Sylvia's

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

playing might well satisfy even a cultivated musician—to Philip it was simply perfect, and he unconsciously paid it the highest tribute, by actually forgetting the beautiful girl, in the delight of listening to the gifted violinist. Roused by the silence which followed Dick's departure, Philip woke to the realisation of the fact that he was alone with the girl he had grown to love so deeply in these last few weeks, and, man-like, the music-lover once more became the woman-lover, and he changed his mental attitude, by forgetting the gifted violinist in gazing at the beautiful girl, who was quietly, almost dreamily watching him from the depths of the luxurious chair into which she had sunk, after finishing her playing. He started to his feet impulsively, not knowing just what he intended to do, but moved and thrilled as he had never been in all his life before.

“ Sit down again,” said Sylvia gently. “ I see in your eyes that you love music.”

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

But he remained standing.

“ I love music,” he said in a low voice, “ and I love you—I love you with my whole soul, Countess. It seems to me that I only began to live when I met you—can you care for me—will you marry me?”

“ Oh!” she whispered, in amazement. She arose slowly—seeming to be drawn upward by the strength of his gaze. She leaned one hand against the arm of her chair, and stood looking at him earnestly for some moments, without another word. At last she said slowly: “ Last night—after you had gone, I thought about you for some time—I wondered—I hoped that we might some day become good friends—as Dick and I are—but I never dreamed that you would want—it seems so strange that you should want me to marry you. I—I cannot understand why you do.”

“ It is not difficult for any one else to understand,” he said. “ Every one loves you—the moment he meets you. I loved you even be-

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

fore I heard your voice. I used to see you on the Piazza and the canals—I used to watch for you—and my love for you filled my heart the first time I saw your face, I think. It was one evening, you were with some friends taking ices at Florian's, where we were together the other afternoon, and since that evening,—it was two weeks ago—I seem to live but to see you again—and after each meeting, I have but existed until I could see you again. I meant to have waited longer before speaking, but I can keep silent no longer, your wonderful music has so stirred me. I love you, I love you! When a man loves as I love you, he cannot be patient, he must speak. What can I say to make you know how I love you? What can I do to win your love? Can you give me no hope?”

“I do not know,” said Sylvia, sinking into the chair again. “You are very good to love me so—but I wish you did not—I shall never love any one. I have never thought of doing so.”

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

I have always laughed and jested at love. I have never wished to love. I have wanted to remain always free and happy, for it seems to me one can be happy only when free. I don't like to take life seriously, and love is such a serious thing, I have avoided thinking about it. Please do not love me as you say you do—simply *like* me—let us be good friends and be gay and enjoy ourselves. I am sure that we can have the jolliest times together, if you will not ask me to be—to be different from what I am.” She spoke earnestly and eagerly. She liked the man before her tremendously; she longed to have him understand her nature; she wanted him to see that while she would hate to hurt him, yet he must realise that she could not love him, nor any one. Her nature was wholly sunny and joyous, she could not imagine love coming to her—she was afraid of it—to her it seemed a deep and appalling thing, something which must shadow the joyousness of life.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

“Do you not understand?” she asked. “Cannot you do as I ask?” While she had been speaking, he had seated himself in a chair opposite her, and when she had finished, he said gravely,

“I will try to do anything you wish. If we may be good friends, I am content, I am honoured beyond what I deserve. If I may have your friendship—are you sure you are willing to take me for a friend?”

“Yes, indeed—indeed I am!” she said eagerly. “We will sign our compact of friendship at once—here is my hand on it.” She stretched her hand, dimpled as a child’s, over to him. He took it reverently and pressed it to his lips.

“‘A friend’ may do that, may he not?” he asked simply.

“Yes—on such a solemn occasion as this—to seal such an important contract. And now,” she went on gaily, jumping up, “I notice that Dick has gone through the collection I gave

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

him, and by the silence, I fancy he refuses to go over it again, so let us go out and congratulate him."

"Yes, we must," said Philip, following her. "I am sure that he plays well, as he does everything well, although I have never heard him."

"But you have just heard him play to-night," said Sylvia.

"No," replied Philip, "I fear that I did not hear a note."

"Oh, but don't let him know that. You must congratulate him just the same—you can take my word for his splendid playing. I have heard him many times, and to my mind, he plays beautifully. Oh, here he comes, but we will make him go back again to the court with us, for I have ordered a little supper to be served there."

A few minutes later the three were seated about a quaint little supper table in the large, open court. It had been laid according to one

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

of Sylvia's original ideas. A little fountain played in the centre of the table; the small round basin was made of Venetian glass, with an exquisitely wrought border of delicate colours. On the surface of the water floated some pink, purple and white water-lilies, and around the outside of the basin there was a crown of maiden-hair ferns. This left only a narrow strip on which to place the dishes, but it was enough, for, as there were only three to be served, little room was needed. Back of the table a little way, there was a circle of a dozen tall candle-bearers rising from the floor. These were dark figures of boys, arrayed in bright gold and silver costumes, such figures as can be found only in Venice. The large candles gave a soft light, half revealing the background of tropical flowers and plants. The stillness was broken only by the splashing of the fountain.

“Pardon me, but I must say what I think of it,” said Dick, as they seated themselves.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“This is a feast fit for the gods! And with such a hostess, what can we two, too unworthy mortals, believe but that we are supping on Olympus? And, may I add, how fortunate that the Baroness and her guests wanted to go to the ball, and that her niece did not—for had it been otherwise—this most delightful of evenings would never have been.”

Sylvia was radiant. She took keen pleasure in planning dainty little feasts like this for the enjoyment of her chosen friends, an easy task to one of her exquisite taste and limitless wealth. The servants brought in one dainty dish after another, served in the costliest of china and cut glass, and the three sat talking and laughing like care-free, happy children.

“How do you like the flowers I selected?” asked Sylvia.

“They are beautiful,” said Philip.

“Water-lilies, are they not?” asked Dick.

“Yes. And do you think they are growing,

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

or have they been cut and laid in the fountain?"

"I should think from the depth of the bowl that they are cut," said Dick.

"Then of course they are real?" asked Sylvia, a merry twinkle in her eye.

"Why, certainly," said the others.

"That shows how much men know about flowers," she said laughing, "why, every one knows—every *woman* knows, I mean—that water-lilies always close at night."

"Caught!" said Dick.

"But is it possible that they are artificial?" asked Philip.

"Quite," said Sylvia, taking one out of the water. "I have had them some time. I bought them in Paris to use for decorations."

But even banquets on Olympus must have an ending, and when finally there was no further excuse for remaining longer, they reluctantly turned from the charming scene, and

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

strolled back into the saloon. Soon the chiming of the cathedral clock told them that it was growing late, and that they must say adieu to their fair hostess.

CHAPTER IV

AFTER they had gone, Sylvia stood at the window looking out into the dark night. Light-hearted always, she had felt unusually happy to-night. Even Philip's acknowledgment that he loved her, had not overshadowed her, for she believed that he had understood and agreed with her that it was better to be friends, and he had apparently wished to prove this during the gay evening following his unexpected declaration. He had seemed as cheerful and *débonnaire* as Dick himself, and therefore Sylvia looked happily forward to many more charming evenings with these two friends. And yet, in spite of her pleasant thoughts, a strange shadow seemed to be creeping over her. She did not understand it, and it did not take a definite enough shape to make her very conscious of it, and yet she felt saddened. She was philosopher enough to know that when one has been so joyously light-

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

hearted, a reaction often follows, and she almost dreaded the morrow.

“How foolish of me!” she exclaimed, turning away from the window and going up to her own room. “Nothing will happen tomorrow. Why should I not be as happy then as now? Why should I not go on being so—for ever?” She hummed a little song to revive her spirits and to cast off the unwelcome shadow which seemed to surround her. She fell asleep as quickly and easily as a child, forgetting everything in the long, pleasant dreams which the night brought with it.

But with the morning came a return of the vague uneasiness of the previous evening, which she seemed unable to banish. She was up earlier than the others, who slept late after the fatigue of the ball. The Baroness ordered her breakfast served in her own room, as she had headache, but she sent her maid to request Sylvia’s presence there.

“Good-morning, Aunt Lucia,” said Sylvia,

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

entering the spacious and luxurious bedroom.

“Good-morning,” said her aunt, coldly, not looking up, as she poured out a cup of coffee. She was in a light dressing-gown seated at a table, and Sylvia saw at once that something had sorely vexed her usually placid relative.

“I am so sorry you have headache,” said Sylvia, going over to her and kissing her lightly on the forehead.

“It is not my head which bothers me,” said her aunt.

“What is it then, dear?”

“It is *you*, child. I am extremely displeased that you did not accompany us last night. After we arrived there, the Duke joined us, and he seemed very much annoyed that you had not come.”

A mutinous look came into Sylvia's eyes, and unconsciously her chin went up in the air. Her aunt was looking at her now, and noticed this.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“I presume you do not care how he felt,” she exclaimed angrily.

“I fail to see why his feelings should be of interest to me?” said Sylvia coolly.

“Well, *I* see, and I will tell you. I have spoken to you many times about the Duke. When we first met him in Nice, I was at once taken with him, and I made up my mind then that he was the husband for you. I told you, the day after he proposed, that I should like you to accept him. But I did not urge it. I have not said much since—that is, not as much as I have felt—I have hoped you would come to your senses, and see how foolish you are to keep refusing him. How he has smothered his pride, and proposed again and again, in spite of your constant snubbing,—is a marvel to me. I admire him all the more for it. I feared that he would give you up when you first refused him, but he told me last night that he would never rest until he won your consent.”

“‘Never’ is a big word,” said Sylvia, a

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

strange little smile dimpling the corners of her mouth,—a remark to which her aunt paid no heed, but continued,

“I have been patient with your caprices as long as I can, I must now speak my mind freely. I wish you to marry the Duke. If you refuse, then I shall command you to do so.”

“Command?” said Sylvia, an angry flash coming into her eyes.

“And why not? Have I not the right? Your father, at his death, appointed me your sole guardian. Since then my chief concern in life has been to find you a suitable husband. You know I love you dearly, and have enjoyed your being with me; I shall miss you greatly when you are married, but I must make the sacrifice. It is only right and fit that you should marry. You are nineteen now, past the age when a girl of your rank should marry. You know most girls in Italy are married very young. I was married when I was fifteen.”

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

The Duke wishes to renew his suit. He has asked me to plead for him."

"I cannot understand why you feel that I should marry," said Sylvia. "Are we not happy as we are? Even if I am nineteen, there is plenty of time. Why need you worry?" She had been speaking lightly, even smilingly. "Besides," she went on, the smile dying out of her eyes, and a seriousness taking its place, "I shall never marry until I fall in love."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed her aunt. "Love is of little importance. How many women are there who are in love with their husbands? They could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Here is the Duke—a man of great rank—he is the one to marry—don't stop to analyse whether or not you are in love with him. If you let your heart be your guide, you will be sure to fall in love with a nobody."

"What of that?" said Sylvia. "Rank is not the only thing in the world. There are more real, noble gentlemen among the men

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

without titles, than among those whose fathers have given them the rank of dukes and lords."

"I think you must have gotten those ideas in America," said her aunt; "they are certainly very absurd."

"Dear Aunt Lucia, if I should want to marry an American gentleman, one without money, position, and with no ancestors, I should do it. I care absolutely nothing for rank or titles, in fact, many of these *noblemen* disgust me."

A dangerous light came into Sylvia's eyes—but the Baroness did not observe it, she was too intent on her own thoughts. She considered Sylvia's words extremely foolish. It was her firm determination to see her niece married into one of the noblest families in Europe.

"Hear me," said her aunt firmly, "I am bound you shall marry the Duke."

"But I do not love him," said Sylvia. "You cannot seriously wish me to marry him, when I do not love him?"

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“But indeed I can. He is the catch of the season. In England you would be welcomed into the most exclusive circles—even into those of Royalty itself.”

“How can you think of a mere Duke?” said Sylvia. “A Prince alone would be good enough for me!”

“You are sarcastic,” said the Baroness, with a sigh, who, however, was almost at the end of her patience.

Sylvia’s mood had changed. An angry flush had mounted to her cheeks. “I beg of you not to mention him again as a possible suitor,” she said, stamping her small foot. “I loathe the man—have you not heard of his bad habits and his dissipations?”

Her aunt was angry, she scarcely heeded Sylvia’s last remark. She saw that the girl was obstinate, and she was at her wit’s end for some argument which should alter her determination.

“I—I do not know,” she replied, absently.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

"I know," said Sylvia. "It is known as a fact that he is very fast. When at Nice, I heard that he went frequently to Monte Carlo and played heavily, that he does worse things in London—he and the other men of his set—their dinners together, which are nothing but excuses for heavy drinking. Oh, it is abhorrent! Such men disgust me."

"You should not listen to the idle gossip," said the Baroness. "Men of his rank are bound to cause jealousy and be slandered."

"It is not gossip," said Sylvia, "it is the truth. Can you not see it written in his face? Is he not every inch a man of the world, and of its worst type?"

"You are prejudiced beyond endurance," said the Baroness. "Do not abuse him any more, I will not listen. Can a man not have his pastimes, without being taken to task for it? A man of his rank is at liberty to do almost anything, and be forgiven. You are too particular—we are all human."

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“Human!” retorted Sylvia, “such men are not human, they are beasts!”

“Hush!” cried her aunt, her face as white with anger as Sylvia’s own. “The Duke is as good as other men, and he is of such rank, that any girl should be proud to become his wife.”

“I cannot understand,” said Sylvia, looking at her aunt and softening a little—for she loved her, in spite of her worldliness. “I cannot possibly understand why you care so much for rank. I know you love me—and yet you wish me to marry a bad man—against my will—just to become a Duchess.”

“Yes,” exclaimed the Baroness, at last irritated beyond the power of endurance. “I do wish it, and what is more—if you do not obey me—I will no longer be your guardian. If you refuse to marry the Duke, I shall give you up as hopelessly obstinate—I shall no longer have anything to do with you.”

Sylvia raised herself to the full limit of her

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

girlish height, standing before her aunt, at last thoroughly enraged. Her eyes flashed fire.

“Go to your room,” said the Baroness. “If you decide to obey me, let me know, otherwise,—do not come near me.”

Sylvia turned and left the room without a word. She went directly to her own room and shut the door. She walked back and forth with clenched hands—her brain seemed to be on fire. Never in her whole life had she been stirred with such emotion. Back and forth, back and forth she went—for a long time—until at last Nature claimed its own, and fatigue overpowered her. She threw herself on the bed and burst into a flood of tears, which finally subsided into sleep. She lay for several hours in a deep, dreamless slumber. When she awoke, she gave a little shudder, wondering in a dazed way, what had happened—then it all came back to her. But the grief had passed, and what remained was an outward calm, but a deep, inward determination never

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

to yield. Her aunt's arguments had but strengthened her detestation of the Duke.

Her brain worked quickly. She stood looking at her reflection in the mirror for a few moments, resolving the question in her mind of what she should do. It did not take her long to form a plan. She sat at her little desk and wrote a note, directing it to Dick. Then ringing for her maid, she told her to have it sent at once. She hastily made preparations to go out, changing her morning *negligée* for a street costume. She then opened her door and passed through the hall down the stairs, fortunately meeting no one. She descended to a gondola and ordered her gondoliers to take her to the English gardens.

CHAPTER V.

FORTUNATELY Dick was at home. He was spending his vacation in Venice, enjoying a respite from his architectural work in Rome. He had worked steadily at his profession for five years in Italy, and had at last been compelled to take a few weeks of rest. Sylvia's note found him just as he was setting out for an afternoon stroll, but this he immediately abandoned, upon reading her message. It was very brief, but he was startled at its importance. It ran:

“If you can, meet me in the English Gardens at once. I am going directly there. I want to see you about something. I cannot ask you to come to the house, and will explain why when I see you.

SYLVIA.”

He went quickly down and jumped into a

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

gondola and reached the gardens but a very few moments after Sylvia.

She was seated on a bench at the end of a certain pretty little path, where she and Dick had sometimes walked together. She felt sure that he would remember this place, and look for her here, which he did. As he turned into the path and caught sight of her, he quickened his steps. He noticed that she was rather pale. She looked up at him with a smile of welcome, but there were tears in her eyes. He sat beside her, waiting for her to speak.

“Of course you must know,” she said, “that something very unusual has happened to make me ask you to meet me here alone, and not at the palace. I wanted to see you at once, for I want to ask you to tell me if you think I am doing right. I have made up my mind to go back to America—at once—but I value your opinion, and I did not want to go without telling you, and feeling that you approve

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

of this step. We have been such very good friends, Dick, I did not want to leave without saying good-bye to you."

Dick was dumfounded. "You don't mean that you are going for long—to stay?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," she answered. "I must. My aunt and I had a difference of opinion. It was about the Duke; she wishes me to marry him. If it were any other man—some man I could at least respect—I might do it, for I love Aunt Lucia, and would like to please her, but you know, even better than I, about the Duke. I cannot, and will not, marry such a man, even to please my aunt. Blinded by the glamour of his title, she seems to think nothing of his morals. Title! Heavens, how I hate that word!"

"I do not blame you in the least," said Dick. "But surely you need not go away to America to avoid marrying him?"

"I must, because my aunt said that unless I

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

agreed to marry him, not to come near her, nor speak to her again. And so I shall go to California. I am sure my aunt, Mrs. Gordon, will be willing to take me again. I know that she is fond of me, and I am fond of her. She felt bad when my father insisted upon my joining him in Nice after my mother's death."

"And so you are to live in America now." A deep shade of melancholy had come over him. What would Venice be—what would Italy be—what would life itself be—now—without this beautiful girl—who was dearer to him than he had realised?

"I hope that you will be happy there," he said at last. "Do you think you shall enjoy yourself as much as you have at Nice?"

"No, I am sure I shall not," said Sylvia, with a sigh. "There is no place like Nice to me, but I cannot live there without my aunt. I suppose I am too young to live without some relative being with me."

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

“Are you going to cross alone? It is a long journey.”

“I shall take one of my maids, Marie, with me. She is forty and a devoted soul. She is here in Venice. We shall set out this afternoon. I must go to Nice first to get some of my things. I think that we shall get a courier there to accompany us, it will be so much easier. I shall leave a note for my aunt, saying that I have gone, and that my villa at Nice will be left in care of the housekeeper and gardeners, and that she is welcome to use it as much as she likes. I think she will want to, for she is fond of Nice, and does not like Venice very well. But tell me that you think I am doing the best thing, there is nothing else I could do, is there? Surely you would not advise me to marry the Duke?”

“No, no, a thousand times no,” said Dick. “That would be horrible. And, knowing your aunt as I do, I am sorrowfully sure it would be useless to try to persuade her to

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

change her determination at present, at any rate. For, with all due respect to that worthy relative of yours, Sylvia, she is a veritable granite monument of obstinacy. But, Sylvia, why will you not marry some one else?"

"Some one else? Why, who, for instance?"

"There is Lord Raleigh, my cousin, he is a very fine fellow, and any one can see that he is eating his heart out for you. Or, there is the Roman Count, he is a splendid fellow, an exception, among Italian men—begging your pardon. Or there is Mr. Stanford, the Englishman. I know him very well. These three are the only ones among your admirers that I can really recommend—as the other men are not to be thought of, I hope. And, too, there is Philip; he, poor chap, is so obviously in love, that we might as well put him promptly in the list."

"Ah, Mr. Monroe," said Sylvia. "I am sorry that he should care. But surely he will

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

soon get over it. He will find that it was a mistake."

"Then, if Philip, or any of the others will not do, why not take me?" said Dick.

"You?" said Sylvia, laughing. "Do you know, I should rather take you than any of them?" She was still laughing, but he was not.

"Sylvia, will you ever be serious—if *I* will?" he asked, looking at her. There was a queer expression in his eyes—she noticed it—and it startled her.

"That would be impossible, and so unnatural for us both," she answered lightly. "No, I fear none of those men, if they really do want me, can have me, for I do not intend to marry. And now, good-bye, dear friend," she said, rising, and giving him her little gloved hand. "I leave at four, and it is to be a secret until I reach Nice and make my arrangements. I cannot ask you to come to see me off, as I must slip away as quietly as possible."

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“And so this is good-bye?” said Dick. “I fear it is for ever so much longer than I dare to think for, as I have been kept here in Italy for the last five years, I seem likely to stay here the rest of my life. Vacations come seldom with me, and then they are short, so there is no hope of my going over to see you.”

“I am so very, very sorry,” said Sylvia, “I hate good-byes. We have had such good times together—I shall miss you so much, my dear, dear friend.”

“Thank you,” said Dick simply. “You know how I shall feel.” His eyes betrayed more than his words, but she did not see them, for she was looking toward the water.

“But you are not going to pass entirely out of my life?” said Dick. “I may write to you, may I not, and you will let me hear from you?”

“Why, yes, surely,” said Sylvia.

They went toward the water's edge. He helped her into her gondola, and the gondoliers

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

propelled the little craft quickly away, leaving him standing there, watching her until the boat disappeared from sight.

.

It was several hours later. Dick was sitting on a small balcony leading from his room at the hotel, smoking an after-dinner cigar, when Philip knocked on his door. He had seen him enter the hotel, and called "Come out here," and Philip joined him.

"I thought I would come to see what you were doing with yourself to-night," said Philip.

"I know not," he said:

"The Night has a thousand eyes—
The Day but one—
Yet the Light of the whole World dies
With the setting Sun."

Dick motioned to a chair.

"Why do you quote those lines?" asked Philip.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“Now for the translation,” said Dick. “The Night, we will say, is the World—with its thousand lights. Venice is the Day—with its Sun, and ‘the Light of the whole World dies’ when that Sun is gone. Do you catch my meaning?”

“I suppose you mean that the Countess is the ‘Light of the World;’” said Philip. “That is a beautiful idea. But I do not understand the rest.”

Dick looked at him pityingly.

“Poor chap!” he murmured. “Then listen—the fact is—that the ‘Light of Venice’ has gone—gone to America—for an indefinite period. Now are we not left in darkness?”

“What!” exclaimed Philip, starting to his feet, “Sylvia gone?”

CHAPTER VI.

EDITH LAWRENCE stood before the long cheval glass in her room. It was eight o'clock in the evening, she had dined, and had come up to her room again to take a last, critical glance at her toilette, before going to the drawing-room. She wanted to be sure that she looked her best. As she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror, she smiled exultantly.

“Yes, I think I shall do. This gown is the most becoming one I have had for some time.”

She had reason to be proud of her looks and the gown, for it suited her type of beauty to perfection. It was made of a filmy, corn-coloured silk gauze, embroidered in scarlet poppies, made over a silk of a deeper shade of corn-colour. It was cut low in the neck, and the sash was broad and of scarlet silk edged with heavy fringe. It was a striking gown, but the colours were so arranged that they har-

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

monised and gave a rich, artistic effect. Her hair was very dark and heavy, caught up loosely in a large coil on the top of her head, with a red rose tucked into the coil. Her eyes were dark and languishing, her complexion also dark, and her figure was tall and graceful. But her greatest charm lay in her manner, it was indescribable, and wholly fascinating, that is, fascinating to men, to women she paid no attention, and therefore she had no friends among her own sex. Her beauty, wealth, and popularity with men caused much jealousy among her would-be rivals, but she feared no rivals, she would admit of having none in the whole of New York, and this was probably true, as she had been the reigning belle in society for the last three years.

But this evening she was not thinking of her social triumphs, she was thinking of a man, the one to whom she was engaged, Eric Fielding.

“His steamer arrived this morning,” she

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

said, talking to herself, "and he will be here this evening. He will be here in just half an hour. He always arrives just at eight-thirty, when he comes merely for a call, never earlier, and never later. What a strange man he is! He has so many little ways that are entirely his own, that other men would never think of. That is one reason why I love him, his individuality is so strong. That is one reason, and another is—oh, there are hundreds of reasons why I love him, I only wish I could think of one which would make me dislike him; my loving him is the curse of my existence, for it hurts my pride when I know that he does not love me. And yet, it is only my love that made him mine. That night, last autumn, at the De Lancey's ball, when he overheard my confession to Kitty, when I sat in a corner with her, crying like a schoolgirl, and then told her why, that I was crazy over Eric, and that I knew he was absolutely indifferent to me. Kitty was trying to comfort me, when we dis-

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

covered that he had been sitting alone on the other side of the palms, and had overheard everything. Oh, the shame of that moment!—it makes me hot with mortification to think of it even now. I went directly home and vowed I would never go anywhere again, so that I need never meet him. And then the very next evening he came. It was only the third time he had ever paid me a visit, the other two had been mere social duties, but that evening I knew he must have come to see me, for some reason, and I was so excited that I was dizzy. At first I thought I would not go down to see him, then I was overpowered with the desire to go, and went—and that was the beginning of my downfall, the downfall to my pride, I mean. He was dear, no one could have been more kind and thoughtful; he told me how he had been an unintentional listener, and on discovering that he was the subject of our conversation, he wanted to come and ask me to marry him, if I really loved him. It

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

was an honourable thing to do—I know that—few men would do it, when they did not love the girl, and of course I knew he did not love me—a girl can always tell—nor did he pretend it, and I knew I ought not to take advantage of his offer, but I was so fond of him, it was so tempting, I could not resist the opportunity of trying to win his love. And all this last winter, how good he has been, he has done everything a man could for a girl. When he said he would like to go abroad for a few weeks, if I did not mind, of course I told him to go, and while he has been gone, I have been thinking, thinking, thinking! I know he went because he wanted a little rest from this farce he has been playing, I know it is a farce, and all for my sake, yet I cannot give him up. And he has never shown that he has wanted me to give him up. Perhaps in time he will learn to love me! Ah—” She had been sitting looking, and talking to herself, as if her reflection in the mirror were another person, and that it was a

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

relief to pour it all out, to speak in words what was in her heart, what had been there for the last six months.

“And now,” she said, stepping very near to the glass, so that she almost touched her reflection, “perhaps his trip has taught him that. Why should he not? Am I not attractive? There are men, I know, and not a few, who think me beautiful, and who would throw themselves at my feet, if I were not engaged to Eric, and surely he can think as these men. He *shall* love me!”

She looked so superb as she stood there, her face lighted with eager hope and an unusual excitement, which enhanced her beauty, that the fulfilment of her words seemed the most natural thing in the world.

CHAPTER VII.

"I SUPPOSE," said Eric's sister, the next morning at breakfast, "now that you have just returned from abroad, you will not care to take another long journey?"

Eric looked across at her in surprise.

"Why, no. Why should I?"

"I have been hoping that you might want to go out to Southern California. I would like to have some one go for me on a matter of business, and you are just the man; you have nothing to do to keep you at home. I should think you would enjoy a visit to California."

Eric hesitated before replying. He would like to oblige his sister, and in fact would not object to going, he was always fond of travel and had never seen Southern California, and yet he felt that if he went now, even for only a few weeks, Edith might think it odd. His sister read his thoughts, although she did not read his willingness to go, she supposed

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

that he hesitated because he could not bear to tear himself away again so soon.

“If I put off this business for a couple of months, would you go then?” she asked.

“Why, yes, of course,” replied Eric, “I would go at once, if it were not that——”

“Oh, I understand,” said Miss Fielding, “and two months hence will do just as well. I will tell you what it is I want. If you remember, I bought a ranch out there last autumn, and now I think I would like to sell it, although I am not quite sure.”

“I remember,” said Eric. “I confess I could not understand at the time, why you wanted to make an investment in such an out-of-the-way place.”

“It was not an investment. I do not care about its bringing me in money, I merely had the idea that I would like to go out there to live.”

“But why choose such a God-forsaken spot, at least a place where you know no one?”

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

“Well, I bought it before you were engaged. I had not calculated upon your falling in love, and I fancied that you might be persuaded to go out with me. We could have managed it very well out there, don't you think so? You are a good companion to live with, I could ask no better, even for an old woman like myself. Think of it, Eric, I am forty-six. Just twenty years older than you are. That is pretty old.”

“Indeed it is not,” said Eric. “Wait until you are seventy or eighty before you think of getting old. Age is merely a matter of one's feelings; one can seem almost any age one feels, and I consider you still young, you are just at the prime of your life now.”

“I hope you are right,” said Miss Fielding, “but I find each winter that this severe cold gets on my nerves, and it is not enough to go away for a few months. I want a permanent home in some place with a warm climate all the year around. But I think that I shall

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

give up the idea of California. It would certainly be lonely out there without you. I think I shall go abroad and settle somewhere on the Riviera. In fact, I have almost made up my mind to start next month."

Miss Fielding was Eric's only relative. Their mother had died when Eric had been but a schoolboy, their father had died just after Eric's graduation from college, leaving the house on Fifth Avenue to him, and the large fortune divided between the two. They had continued to live here together, each devoted to the other, and yet free to travel and make their own plans as they chose.

About six o'clock of that same day, Edith stood again in her dressing-room, adding the finishing touches to her toilette, but now she did not look at herself with gratification, for she was in a dejected mood. She had donned a black dress, high in the neck, made in the simplest style, and yet of rich material, having pinned at her belt the bunch of violets which

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

Eric had sent her. She had on no jewelry or ornaments of any kind except her engagement ring. "There, I have gowned myself to-night in just the way my mood makes me feel. Last night was such a disappointment. I looked my very best, my gown was a dream, and yet what good did it do me? He did not even notice it, my beauty had no effect on him, he was as cold and indifferent as ever. His trip, the trip I thought might change him, what has it done? Nothing! Oh, I hate myself! If he were a graven image, I could move him as easily."

She glanced at her reflection with a frown, then hastily turned to go.

"I will play a little before he comes, to shake off this discouraged feeling," she said to herself as she descended the stairs. Her mother and father had gone out that evening to a dinner party, so she and Eric were to dine alone, but she did not expect him until seven, and as it was now only six-thirty, she was

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

very much surprised, as she entered the drawing-room, to see him sitting before the grate fire, apparently having been there some few moments. It was such an unheard-of thing for him to be either early or late in keeping an engagement, her astonishment was so great, that she stood a moment in silence, watching him. He was leaning forward in his chair, looking into the coals of the fire, as if thinking deeply. Edith's spirits brightened.

"What if, after all, he does care?" she whispered to herself. "Perhaps he did discover last night that he does love me, and it would have been so unnatural for him to have shown it at once—but now—he is thinking—ah——"

She stole softly over toward him, a smile on her lips.

"A penny for your thoughts?" she said joyfully, touching him lightly on the shoulder.

He looked up, and jumped to his feet.

"Oh, good evening," he said, taking her

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

hand, "I knew that I was early, and so I told James not to announce me."

"But my penny?" she persisted, as they seated themselves in front of the fire, for, though it was April, it was still a bit chilly at night, and an open fire was welcome.

"What penny?" he asked, having forgotten her remark.

"The penny I offered you for your thoughts as I came in."

He laughed and replied, "They really were not worth a penny."

"But *I* wish to be the judge of that. Surely if I want to buy, you are willing to sell?"

He remembered perfectly of what he had been thinking. He had forgotten his surroundings, and had drifted back, in imagination, to a certain moonlit evening in Venice, just before he sailed. It had seemed strange and unaccountable to him, but that day and evening had returned to his thoughts often, just as his friend Philip had prophesied.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

though he was unwilling that this should be so. But who in this world is a controller of even his thoughts?

Eric was silent a moment, wondering how he could answer Edith's question, without telling her his thoughts.

"I really insist," said Edith, still believing they were of herself. She wanted to hear this more than anything in the world, and she looked across at him eagerly.

"Do you want me to be quite frank?" asked Eric.

"Yes, surely."

"Well, I was thinking of Venice, a certain evening, just before I sailed."

"Oh!" said Edith, scarcely able to conceal her chagrin. But her curiosity was aroused, his attitude had been so earnest, she felt intuitively that the subject of his thoughts was absorbing.

"Tell me about it," she continued. "Why did you think of that evening?"

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

“ I was wondering myself why I should,” he explained.

“ And who—who was there? ”

“ Philip Monroe, Leigh Dunlop and I. ”

“ And was that all? ” Edith looked up at him, she seemed very persistent, and he knew that the two men had not been the real subject of his thoughts.

“ Those are all whom I was with. And yet there was some one whom we were all watching—a girl—but she was not with us—she was in a gondola, passing on the canal below. ”

“ A girl? ” murmured Edith. “ Was she—someone you knew? ”

“ Leigh had met her, but Philip and I had only seen her there in Venice. ”

“ Was she—she must have been beautiful—to have excited so much admiration? ”

Eric had forgotten for the moment, he was back again in Venice.

“ She was the most—— ” but he started suddenly, remembering, exclaiming to himself,

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“What am I saying?” then aloud, “Yes, she was really very pretty.”

“Pretty!” said Edith, rising hastily, “you were not going to say *pretty*.”

She was terribly disappointed, but she pulled herself together, for above all, she was determined that Eric should not know of her disappointment, or think her jealous. She laughed lightly, and went over to the piano.

“I have learned some new songs while you have been gone, shall I sing some of them to you?”

After she had sung a few moments, dinner was announced.

During dinner, Edith was her gayest and most brilliant self. After all, Eric was hers—that girl was away off in Venice, he did not even know her, why should she be jealous of her, or anyone? But when dinner was over, and they were again in the drawing-room, Edith’s gay spirits seemed to have left her abruptly, as all gaiety must do which is forced,

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

and does not spring from the heart. Edith was looking at Eric, and noticing his hair as the light fell on it from a tall lamp which stood on a table back of him. His hair was light brown and very heavy, but the lamplight falling on it made it seem almost golden. Edith was fancying what a delight it would be if she could gently run her fingers through it, stroking it tenderly, as other women were allowed to do to the men they loved. And his eyes—those eyes that fascinated her so. She forgot herself for a moment, and came over to him, laying her hand caressingly on his hair, and looking down at him.

“Oh, Eric,” she said, “when we are married, will you take me to Italy? To Venice? I have always thought it the most beautiful city—but it would be Heaven itself to go there with you—I should be happy anywhere with you—if you but loved me.” Then she drew her hand away quickly, and turned from him.

“I forgot,” she said, her voice catching in

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

a little sob. "I forgot for a moment that you are determined not to care for me. Oh, why are you this way?" she cried, turning toward him. "Why can you not love me? Am I so ugly—am I so disagreeable—am I so lacking in all that charms a man—am I a devil—that you scorn me so?"

Eric sprang to his feet.

"Edith!" he exclaimed, "how can you ask that?"

"But it is the same thing," she replied. "You are as indifferent and cold as if I were a piece of furniture, instead of a girl—real flesh and blood—a girl who adores you, and to whom you are engaged. Why will you not love me?"

"Edith," he said slowly, "I cannot tell. I admire you greatly, you are very clever and beautiful. I think more of you than——"

"Oh," she said, interrupting him with a gesture of disdain. "You *think* a good deal of me! Of course you think of me. We are

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

engaged, are you not obliged to think of me? You *admire* me! But what does a woman care for admiration, when she wants love? Love is what I want, and I know you do not love me the very least bit in the world."

"I have always been fond of you, Edith," he said, "but I could not give more. I have always been very frank with you—a man cannot pretend to love. I wish with all my heart that I did love you. I cannot understand why I do not, you are vastly worthy of it. But it has not come yet. Love is a thing we cannot control, it comes—or it stays away without our being able to help it in the least. I have often prayed that it might come, for if you love me, I want to love you, I want to give you more than it has been possible to give as yet, I want to give you all that a man should give the girl he is to marry. I am only deeply grieved that I have not been able to do it as yet."

His words softened her feelings, for now

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

she understood, which she had not done before, just how he felt, and this was a comfort. She came back and sat down again.

“I am sorry that I said what I did. Forgive me, Eric. I really did not mean to say anything of the kind. I ought to have controlled my feelings, but sometimes it is hard. I forgot my pride—in fact, I believe, that ever since I have known you, pride and I have parted company. But now we will talk of that no more. Let me post you on all that has happened in our set since you went wandering.”

CHAPTER VIII.

A LONG, low, one-storied adobe house built in the old Spanish style, stood in the midst of a large, luxuriant Southern California garden, from which ran a narrow road, stretching far into the distance through the wooded country to San Diego, about eight miles distant. Beyond the garden, lay immense groves and orchards of oranges and other fruits. The mountains lay far off to the East, and but two miles westward was the sea.

On one of the broad piazzas of this adobe mansion, sat its mistress, Mrs. Gordon, a cheery, good-natured little body. She was one of those agreeable women whose greatest ambition in life is to make those around her comfortable and happy. She adored her big, manly husband, and spent her days in managing his household in the most perfect manner possible. When her household duties were over, she would take a book, seat herself in a

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

shady corner of one of the piazzas, and await his return for supper. He spent almost every hour of daylight off somewhere overseeing his men in the orchards, or riding to San Diego on business, but he never missed being home by six o'clock, and he always found his fond little wife waiting for him out on the piazza. It was now nearly six o'clock, and she looked down the road, expecting every moment to hear the sound of his horse's hoofs, and presently her patience was rewarded. "There are two horses," she said to herself, as she arose and went down the steps to meet her husband. "Barbara has probably joined him somewhere."

But when Mr. Gordon drew near the house, she saw that his companion was a young man.

When the two men had dismounted, and their horses had been led away by a stable boy who had come at the sound of their approach, Mr. Gordon said to his wife:

"My dear, let me present Mr. Fielding."

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

Mr. Fielding, this is my wife. As you know, I went over to San Diego to-day, and there had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Fielding. He is a friend of Harry Tanner, you remember my old school chum? And any friend of Harry's is most welcome with us, is he not, Anne? Mr. Fielding has come out to see about the ranch I sold to his sister last autumn, and I want him to have plenty of opportunity to look it over, so I thought he might like to stay with us a few days. To-morrow morning I must go down to Los Angeles for a day or so on business, but I have persuaded Mr. Fielding to stay here until I can return. He says he has never been in California before, so it will all be new to him, and I shall have to depend upon you and Barbara to see that he enjoys it."

"Indeed, your husband is more than kind," said Eric; for it was Eric Fielding. "And I scarcely know how to express my gratitude."

"You are very welcome," said Mrs. Gordon,

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

with a smile. "While my husband is gone, Barbara and I will do our best to make you become an admirer of California, for we think there is no country like it."

"I am sure I am that now," said Eric, "from what I have already seen."

Mr. Gordon then took Eric through a broad archway, across the open court, to one of the guest chambers beyond. In a few moments a man drove up the road in a cart from San Diego with Eric's luggage. When it was brought to his room, he changed his clothes, and then joined Mr. and Mrs. Gordon on the front verandah. This was a broad, comfortable porch, shaded by vines, and covered with lounging chairs and little tables, so that it was more of a living-room than a porch.

"Where is Barbara?" asked Mr. Gordon. "Is she not rather late?"

"Yes," said his wife, "it is growing dark. I wish that she would come, as supper is ready. That child is simply crazy over riding, and is

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

in the saddle from morning till night; she is really more enthusiastic about it than you are, John."

Mr. Gordon laughed. He loved to see the girl enjoy something of which he himself was so fond.

"Where did she go to-day?" he asked.

"I do not know where they went. After luncheon, Tom came over, and off they rode."

"Hullo, there they come now, racing as usual," said Mr. Gordon, as the sound of galloping horses reached their ears. Eric looked down the road and watched the two as they approached. Their horses were very close together; it was difficult to tell which had the lead, but, as they drew near, the girl's horse gave a fresh start, and came up several yards ahead of the other.

"At last, at last I've won!" called the girl, over her shoulder to her companion. Before he had a chance to dismount and help her, she had jumped lightly down from her horse.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“Oh, uncle!” she said, running up the steps, “it’s the first time. Always before, Tom has won. We have tried it day after day, and all this afternoon down on the beach, and coming home, I told him I would win this time, or never race again.” Then a sudden idea came to her. “You don’t suppose—? Tom!” she exclaimed, turning to him anxiously, “you did not *let* me?”

“No, indeed,” replied Tom. “You won, fair and square. Although I confess I am glad that you did; for I should have hated like fun never to have raced again, but now we can, that consoles me for losing.”

By this time Barbara noticed that there was a stranger present. She put her hands up to her head and blushed, for her hair had fallen down about her shoulders, from the mad galloping of the last race.

“Barbara, let me introduce Mr. Fielding. This is my niece, Miss Gordon,” said Mrs. Gordon.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

“How do you do?” said Barbara, holding out her hand. “Do forgive this plight I am in, but racing is so rough on one’s looks. Excuse me, I must hurry, as I know supper must be ready.”

Eric’s eyes followed her as she crossed the court and disappeared in one of the corridors opposite. He was making a mental reservation that racing was a vastly becoming occupation, judging from the fair girl he had just met, and that no conventional arrangement of the hair could be as beautiful as this, when one had *such* hair as Miss Gordon’s.

“You must stay for supper, Tom,” said Mrs. Gordon.

“Oh, thank you, but I really cannot,” answered that young man, who was standing on the gravel below, holding his horse’s bridle. Barbara’s horse had gone around to the stables by itself as soon as she had dismounted.

“I have been riding so long,” explained Tom, “that I am not fit for polite society, and

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

besides, I told the mater I should be back, so good night."

He jumped quickly on his horse, and galloped off.

"Pardon us for not introducing him, but he went off so quickly," said Mr. Gordon to Eric. "But no doubt he will be over again to-morrow, then we shall have time. I never saw a girl like Barbara, always coming home on the keen gallop, at the very last moment, so that one's breath is taken away, and one forgets about introductions."

When Barbara reached her own room, she saw a letter lying on her dressing-table which her aunt had placed there as Mr. Gordon had brought it from San Diego.

She took it up and smiled, as she recognised the handwriting. It was from Dick, though it was the first one she had received from him since reaching California.

"Ah, he addresses it Countess Sylvia. That will never do," she said with a frown.

SYLVIA: *The* STORY *of*

“I must write to him and tell him that titles do not belong here, in this democratic life. ‘Countess Sylvia’ would do for Italy—but here ‘Barbara Gordon,’ my dear, dear mother’s name—the sweet mother I lost so long ago.”

She read the letter quickly through, and then changed her riding costume for a soft, white mull dress. Her window was a low one, and she leaned out and picked some sprays of white jasmine which grew in great abundance all about the frame. She twined some of the blossoms in her hair, which was knotted low in her neck. When she joined the others, they entered the dining-room and sat down at the round, highly polished table. The soft lights of the wax candles, the dainty lace doilies, cut glass, bright silver, and rare old china made it very attractive. Eric was surprised to find such luxury so far from what seemed to him the seat of civilisation. The supper was a simple one, but most inviting.

After the meal was over they went out to

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

the verandah again, where they all sat talking, the two men smoking. After a while Mr. Gordon said:

“Out here, we are early retirers and early risers, Mr. Fielding. I have no doubt you will be glad of a good night’s rest after your long journey. But you need not get up in the morning until you are quite ready. I am, from habit, a very early riser, because I like to see that my men begin their work at an early hour. My wife has fallen into the habit too, but my niece does not make an appearance until much later, and you can wait as late as you like.”

Mr. Gordon arose, which seemed to be the signal for the others also, and they bade one another good night.

When Eric was in his room, he sat by his open window, looking out on the garden. His coming among these hospitable people was such a surprise to him. He had had no idea that the Mr. Gordon to whom he had the letter of introduction would welcome him with open

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

arms, and bring him to his home as a welcome guest. So impossible is it to the average New Yorker to understand, without experiencing it, the open-handed hospitality of the West. It was all very delightful, and Eric felt an unusual pleasure in being here, and in the thought that he would be allowed to remain at least a day or two more.

“They are as hospitable as the Southerners,” he said, “and what an ideal life they lead here, no wonder Mr. and Mrs. Gordon are devoted to each other, no wonder the girl is joyous. And she *is* joyous—never have I seen such sheer abandonment to the mere delight in living. She seems to be in love with life—her happiness shows in her whole being, from the crown of that wonderfully fair head of hers to the tip of her dainty little foot.”

As these pleasant reflections were flitting through Eric's mind, he drew in a deep breath of contentment; he was very glad that he had come, and he wished that his sister had a dozen

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

ranches out here for him to attend to, so that it would take him a dozen times as long. When he had been at supper, sitting opposite the girl, he had looked across at her whenever they had spoken to each other, and as many more times as he had dared. The thought of Venice had come quickly to him—though he had seen the beautiful Countess there but twice, and each of those glimpses had been but passing ones; still, the memory of her unusual beauty had been stamped on his mind, and he had instantly been struck with the resemblance between the two. And yet, as he studied his fair *vis-à-vis*, he told himself that she was much younger than the Countess must have been—and her beauty was greater. He was sure the Countess could not have had such eyes as these—so large, luminous, appealing, such mirrors to the lovely soul within.

“I thought the Countess beautiful,” he said to himself. “But I have found a little girl who far surpasses her.”

CHAPTER IX.

WHEN Eric made his appearance the next morning at about eight o'clock, he found his host gone to Los Angeles, his hostess preoccupied with household matters, and no signs of Barbara. He told Mrs. Gordon that he would wait, if he might, until Miss Gordon came, before having breakfast. So she excused herself and left him to read the morning newspaper which was brought up by a messenger with the mail every morning from San Diego.

About an hour had passed, when Eric heard a light footfall on the piazza outside, and looking up from his paper, he saw Barbara enter through one of the low, French windows, clad in a fresh, white muslin dress, her arms full of roses. She greeted Eric with a merry laugh.

"Just up?" she asked. "Lazy man! I have been up for an hour, but I told auntie I would wait breakfast for you."

"That is very kind of you," said Eric, "but

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

you must not reproach me, for I, too, have been up for nearly an hour, and I told your aunt I would wait for you."

"So you have been thinking me lazy, also? Well, we will lay all the blame to auntie—she forgot that I was in the garden."

Barbara went to a table and laid the roses down. Eric came over and stood opposite her, watching her arrange them in the vases she had already filled with water.

"What exquisite roses!" said Eric, taking one up. "I never saw such a variety."

"Yes, are they not lovely? Though it is June, and we mostly live out of doors, I like to fill the vases every day just the same, and do you know, sometimes it is so chilly in the evening that we are glad to sit in the house with a fire in the grate, and then, of course, we could not get on without the flowers all about the room. Don't you just love them?" she asked, looking at him across the table on which the roses lay in glorious confusion.

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

“Here is a little one I picked for your buttonhole, that is, if you like a posy in your buttonhole. Do you?” She held up a small pink moss-rose for his inspection.

“Of course I do,” said Eric, looking at her face, and not at the rose. She came around and pinned it in; her hand trembled a little.

“Now,” she said, after she had finished arranging the rest of the roses in the vases, “we will go and have some breakfast. You must be nearly starved. I know that I am.”

They spent the morning looking over the groves. Eric had never before seen fruit growing in such luxuriance, and it all interested him very much. He was beginning to wonder why he had never before had the desire to see California. It must have been from his ignorance of its real magnificence.

After dinner, Barbara told him that they would ride to the ranch which belonged to his sister. It adjoined Mr. Gordon's, and was not a long ride. They found the ranch somewhat

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

like Mr. Gordon's, only not nearly so large. The house was a small but comfortable one, though it looked very deserted, as it had been closed for many months.

"The reason I wanted to see it myself," said Eric, as they wandered about, "is that my sister has gone abroad, and has left the place in my hands. She tells me either to sell it, or put some men on it to cultivate the fruit. Which would you advise me to do?"

"I really do not know," said Barbara. "Uncle John says the trees are in their prime now, although you see that they have had no care for the last six months."

Eric looked across the groves. An impulsive desire flashed in his mind. Why not come out and manage it himself? A life in this ideal climate, and living next to—but he checked his imagination at the remembrance that he was to marry Edith before very long. Barbara interrupted his thoughts.

"I think we should be going back," she said.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

“Yesterday I asked Tom Ross to come over to-day to supper, and he will probably come early.”

They mounted their horses and rode back in the long, low shadows of the afternoon. They were silent, both realising the mysterious charm which is always felt at that time of day, just before the setting of the sun. Even the horses seemed to understand, and went slowly along. Eric looked at Barbara, who was but a few feet from him, her exquisite profile outlined against the dark trees. The sunlight fell caressingly on her bright hair. What wonderful hair it was! So heavy, and yet soft and fine, with a little wave in it, and it was of the most beautiful golden shade. She was looking straight ahead of her, watching the shadows creeping and growing larger across the road. Eric drew in a deep, long breath, as if he would drink in the whole scene and impress it on his memory forever.

The next day they had a wire from Mr.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

Gordon saying that he should be detained several days longer, and hoped Mr. Fielding would surely wait for him. So Eric was able to stay on, as he was made most welcome, and he felt that he was justified in waiting, for he had decided to put some men on his sister's ranch and so wanted to talk it over with Mr. Gordon and ask his advice.

That day they spent again in riding about the country. Barbara took him down to the shore, and there they galloped up and down the long, even, sandy beach.

Later, after supper was over, Mrs. Gordon having taken a book and seated herself in the library to read, Barbara and Eric went out on the verandah. The moon had risen and shed a brilliant light on everything, so that the flowers in the garden below could be seen nearly as well as in the daylight. They stepped down from the porch and strolled through the sweet-scented paths, coming to a little fountain and stopping before it.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

Barbara glanced up at her companion, and found that he was looking intently at her. He seemed to have forgotten to say anything, and that perhaps he should not keep on looking at her for such a long time. But the spirit of this wonderful night had gotten into his brain, and it seemed to him that he had entered a new and glorious world, one made entirely for him, with the girl beside him, whose beauty seemed above all earthly loveliness. It seemed to his heated imagination that she had come from another and fairer world to walk here beside him and make his existence perfect. He almost forgot who he really was or what had ever happened to him in his life of the past, the present was so real—so perfect—and she was the centre of it all—and she stood so near to him that he could have touched her if he had had the right.

“It seems to me,” he said at last, looking away from her at the garden about them, “as if you had a little world of your own here.”

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

It is a little paradise made for you to dwell in—no other spot would be good enough.”

Barbara felt a little thrill of delight at his words.

“I am so glad you like our garden,” she said. “I love every nook and corner of it.”

“Have you always lived here in California?” asked Eric.

“I was born here,” said Barbara, avoiding a direct reply, for somehow she shrank strangely from having him discover her true rank and title. “It is a beautiful country, this country of ours, is it not? My uncle has lived on this ranch all of his life; my grandfather left it to him at his death. My mother was born here, too, so you see I have inherited my love for this free, open life, so close to Nature. And yet—and yet—I have thought—one time I believed that there were other existences as attractive, even more attractive, than this—but I was very foolish to think that. I know there really is no place like this gar-

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

den, and this glorious country all about, where one can ride for hours, free and happy as the birds. Let's sit over on this bench," she continued, moving toward it, "and watch the water rise and fall. Aren't the drops silvery in the moonlight? Are you fond of music?" she asked suddenly, hoping that he loved it as she did, for she felt just in the mood for it.

"Yes," said Eric, "I care more for music than anything else."

"Then wait a moment," she said, jumping up and going quickly toward the house.

He looked after her retreating figure in a dazed sort of way. What was she going to do? Nothing seemed too good to come true. Was she going to add still another charm to this already perfect world by playing to him? His question was soon answered, by her reappearance with a violin in her hand. She stood by the fountain, facing him, and began playing. He had heard many violinists, some even famous ones, during his knocking about

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

the world, but never had he heard such an exquisite touch—such perfect music. She began playing Werner's Farewell, "God Guard Thee, Love" from the "Trumpeter of Sackingen," part of which runs as follows:

Expressivo.

God guard thee, Love! It was too fair a dream! God guard thee,
Love! A dream that ne'er might be! God guard thee, Love! It was too
fair a dream! God guard thee, Love! A dream that ne'er might be!

He had heard the opera in Germany when travelling there as a boy with his father, and it had appealed to his romantic young nature tremendously. Although he had not known what love means, he had in fancy felt the lovers' grief at parting—the agony of loving and wanting the impossible.

As the music went on, the air again thrilled him as it had that first time he had heard it,

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

only now a thousand times more. The words came to his thoughts with the music, and it flashed through his mind now that perhaps he was to learn to know their meaning. The hot blood mounted to his forehead. He wanted to stop the world from revolving; he wanted to prevent his own doom. An inner-consciousness was beating mercilessly at his reason, telling him that this music was a herald of his destiny. He sprang up and went across to Barbara, impulsively catching her wrist.

“I beg of you not to play that air—that air above all others!” he said. “Oh, your music is beautiful, the most wonderful I have ever heard, but that air tortures me so—if you but knew!”

She had ceased her playing, and he stood, still holding her wrist.

“Does that song bring you sad recollections?” she asked. “It has always been the one I love best—but if you do not like it—if it has pained you—I am very sorry I chose it.”

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“Of course you could not have known,” he said, looking down at the little wrist he still held, and letting it go quickly, realising how long he had held it, and ashamed that he should have been so rude.

“I was very rude to ask you to stop, but I could not control myself. Will you please forgive me? It is not that it brought back recollections, it was the thought that—that—ah, I must not tell you. What can a Heavenly child like yourself know of Earth’s sorrows?”

She looked at him with wonderment in her big eyes. Of what could he have thought that would move him thus? As he had said, she was only a child, perhaps, sunny, warm-hearted and joyous, yet she was sympathetic, and it hurt her to know that he bore a deep grief in his heart. The tears filled her eyes.

“I am so sorry,” she said, “that you are sad. I wish I could help you. Come,” she continued, starting towards the house, “let us go inside, the night air is growing chilly.”

CHAPTER X.

THE next morning Barbara was up much earlier than usual. She had awakened before daylight, and a little later, when she had heard the servants moving about outside (their quarters were in cottages back and apart from the house), she decided to get up. So she had her breakfast with her aunt, and mounting her pony, she galloped off towards the beach, when it was only six o'clock, some time before Eric made his appearance, although he, too, had been awake for a long time.

When Barbara reached the shore, she dismounted and let her pony nibble the grass at the edge of the field, while she wandered down by the water. She looked out toward the sea, watching the breakers as they beat regularly on the pebbly beach, and then letting her gaze wander out over the vast expanse of water to the horizon itself, where the sky meets the sea, in that strange, wonderful line. She

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

stretched out her arms and looked up at the heavens, as if she wished she could be drawn upwards and become a part of that vast greatness. Then she turned and seated herself a little way from the breakers, leaning her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands. She sat thus for some moments—thinking. Then she looked over her shoulder at her pony back on the grass. She saw the narrow white road leading back to the house whence she had come. All the familiar scene she knew so well, yet in some way seemed to see this morning through different eyes. Unconsciously she had fallen into the attitude of a puzzled child, and with the attitude there seemed to have come some of the child's wistful mood. Half-unconsciously she began talking aloud.

“I wish I might see him coming down that road now. That he would leave his pony next to mine, and then come and sit here near me. Why I should, I don't know, but somehow I feel lonely. Why do I wish for him? I

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

cannot understand. I have never before needed any one in these rambles : my pony has seemed as good company to me as any one could be, yet now—Barbara, what has come over you ? ” she exclaimed impatiently, giving her head a shake that set all the bewitching little curls about her forehead dancing. “ All the glory of this beautiful morning forgotten, in the longing to hear the voice of a man who is almost a stranger ! To hear his voice—it seems to me that I have never before heard such a voice ; it is low, and yet clear, rich, deep and melodious. It has never before seemed possible to me that a voice could be so beautiful.” And yet, if Barbara had but known it, her own was just as musical, and being a woman’s, had a sweet quality, which the manliness of his lacked.

“ And too,” she went on, “ I would like to look at him. I am afraid I look at him too often, and yet I have tried hard not to let him discover that I did, and I believe he never has,

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

except when it would be only natural, when I have been speaking to him. How can any one help watching him? He is so tall, well built and good-looking. He carries himself so superbly. His eyes—one cannot tell at first about his eyes, they are so changeable. First they seem a light blue, then a deeper blue, and sometimes a steel grey. When one looks at his mouth and chin, one believes that they are his best features, but when one sees his eyes, his other good points are forgotten in their charm.”

She jumped up and gave herself a little shake.

“Barbara, you fool, you fool, what is this man to you? Nothing, nothing, nothing! Probably he loves some girl—did he not as much as say so last night, when he told you how bad that song made him feel? He must have meant that his sorrow was because the girl he loved was dead, and that song reminded him of the past. It must have been that, for nothing else could have moved him so. He called

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

me a mere child—saying that I could know nothing of life's sorrow, and that is the sorrow he meant. And if he had not loved and lost, he would have married her and been with her now, for surely, any girl he loved must have loved him."

She had gone over to her pony and stood beside him, stroking his mane.

"Yes, he called me a child, and that is all I am, I suppose, for what do I know of love?" The tears came to her eyes. Suddenly she seemed to pity herself for being so young and knowing so little. She wished she could be as he was, to know what it meant to love; even if he had loved in vain and it was hard to bear, she envied him, for dimly she felt that love is the greatest thing in the world.

"Perhaps some day I shall learn," she said. "I have never wanted to learn before, but now—now it seems different."

A vision of the girl he had loved and lost came before her fancy.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“Whenever he hears that ‘Song of Farewell,’” she said, “and the other airs that remind him of her, he will want to ask the player to stop, as he asked me last night. And the other things that remind him of her—there must be so many—the scent of a certain flower that she always wore, everything connected with her life is dear to him. I—I think I am beginning to understand a little—but, oh, not that way—not that——”

She threw her arms about the pony’s neck. A sob choked her. Her nature was one that awakens to new things suddenly. She was conscious of this, and she had an intuitive feeling that when love should come to her, it would come suddenly and overwhelmingly—and she was afraid.

All at once her pony pricked up his ears and neighed. Barbara looked up.

“Another pony is coming. Can it be his?”

She turned and looked down the road. She was right, Eric was there, coming toward her.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

He waved his hand as he caught sight of her. She laughed merrily, her wish had been granted, he was coming, and to find her, *her!* He drew near, jumped from his horse and stood beside her.

“Your aunt said you told her that you were coming here,” he said. “So I joined you. You do not mind, do you?”

“Oh, no,” she said, smiling up at him. “I never care about being alone, when I can have good company. I started off so early. I thought you would not be up for hours.”

They went down and walked by the shore, in a content so deep as to need no words. The very gladness of living, the beauty of this perfect morning seemed to have entered their veins, and already, though they knew it not, the heart of all the joy lay in this: they were together.

On reaching home, they found Tom Ross waiting for them.

“Let’s go on a picnic to-day,” said Bar-

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

bara. "We will take a long ride off into the hills and eat our luncheon in some pretty place. I fear Aunt Anne cannot come, for she never rides, but we three will go."

They set off, and had a merry time of it. Barbara laughed more gaily than she had ever laughed before. Her merriment proved so contagious that the two men could not help joining in it, although each was conscious of a secret desire for the other's absence.

On their return, after Tom had gone, by the road leading to his father's ranch, a hush came over Barbara and Eric, and they rode home in the gathering twilight almost as silently as they had walked in the morning in the summer dawn.

That evening they sat on the verandah together. Mrs. Gordon was in the library reading. She enjoyed having young people about, but when she was not busy with her household affairs, she liked to spend her time in reading, and so she let the others amuse themselves.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

There was a hanging-lamp above Barbara's head which gave enough light so that Eric could see her face plainly. He noticed how quiet she was, in fact had been ever since their return from the picnic.

"What is it?" he asked.

She looked over at him, a faint smile crept over her mouth, but her eyes were sad.

"I do not know," she said. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I have never seen you this way before, and I wondered of what you could be thinking."

"You mean my being quiet?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I do not know why I am. I am usually laughing, am I not? But I think I am a little tired, we have been so merry all day. Yes, I am sure I am tired."

They were silent after this for a while, then Barbara said: "Auntie had a wire from Uncle John to-day saying that he would reach San

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

Diego to-morrow morning about nine and would come directly home from there. That means he wants me to go there to ride home with him. I always do it when he has been away. Would you like to come, too?"

"Yes," answered Eric, "I should like it very much, if I should not be in the way."

"No, indeed," said Barbara. "We shall have to get an early start to be there on time."

"If you are not too tired, won't you get your violin and play?" asked Eric. She had played for Tom and him all the evening before, but it seemed as if he could never get enough of her music. She brought out her violin and played one air after another, and he sat listening, enraptured.

"Won't you play 'Werner's Farewell' again?" he asked.

"Oh," exclaimed Barbara, "not that one. It makes you sorrowful."

"Yes, but I love it, nevertheless," he answered, "even though I did behave so rudely"

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

the other night when you played it, and I want you to play it again now, if you will. This time I will surely not stop you."

She played it for him, over and over again, as he asked her to repeat it, until finally she knew it was growing late, and that her aunt would want her to come into the house.

CHAPTER XI

THE next morning dawned beautiful and bright, and they rode to San Diego to meet Mr. Gordon and escort him home. When they returned, and had reached the house, the men dismounted, and Eric went quickly over to where Barbara sat on her pony. He had to stand very near in order to help her dismount, and as she jumped, a lock of her hair brushed against him and caught in a college society pin, fastened to his waistcoat, that it was *de riguer* for him to wear at all times and on all occasions. "Wait a moment," he said, "your hair has caught on my waistcoat, let me untangle it for you."

"I will pull it," she said.

"No, indeed, wait a second," and he took off the pin so that the hair was free.

"Thank you," she said.

In his embarrassment and under the thrill

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

of the contact of his fingers with her glorious hair the pin was dropped unheeded and lay unnoticed on the grass. Barbara had turned toward the house, and he followed her. Dinner was served, and they joined Mr. and Mrs. Gordon who were already at the table.

The afternoon was spent by the men talking over the matter of the ranch. Mr. Gordon gave Eric advice as to its management, and told him that he would help him to find an overseer in San Diego to take charge of the ranch and also some men to do the work. Eric decided that he must go away the next morning, as Mr. Gordon was going to San Diego on business, and he knew he should go with him, there being no farther excuse for his remaining longer.

That evening after supper Barbara and Eric wandered into the garden together for the last time. The moon was again brilliant, lighting the familiar paths and showing the flowers in all their beauty, although their gorgeous colours

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

were faded to a misty grey or deep black, save where the white blossoms shone clear and star-like. Barbara seated herself on a rustic bench and motioned Eric to sit beside her.

“What a glorious night,” she murmured.

“Yes,” he replied absently, looking about him, but thinking only that this was good-bye, and wishing that this hour would never end. Suddenly he exclaimed, as if under a spell of an irresistible impulse, “I want to ask your advice. It is about—a friend of mine.”

“I shall be glad to give it, if I am able,” said Barbara.

“Thank you. He is in trouble and wants me to tell him what to do. And I am sure that you could understand and decide a question like this better than a man could. This friend of mine is engaged to be married—but he does not love the girl—it is one of those conventional engagements. And he is in love with some one else, but of course he cannot tell

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

her so, or try to win her love, unless his engagement were to be broken. What do you think he ought to do?"

"Does the girl to whom he is engaged love him?" asked Barbara.

"She has said so, but he cannot but believe that she is mistaken,"

"But if she does love him," said Barbara, "he must keep his word to her, and marry her, and do his best to make her happy."

"But now that he is in love with another, would it be fair to the girl to marry her, when he could never learn to love her?"

"It would be fairer than to break the engagement, as long as she loves him," replied Barbara.

There was a silence for a moment, then Eric said slowly and gravely, "Your words shall be his decision, for your judgment is better than mine. I should have said he need not marry the girl, but perhaps I pitied him too much."

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“I pity him too,” said Barbara, “and when you tell him, he may not take this advice.”

Eric’s eyes had a queer little smile in them for a second, but his lips were closed firmly, as if a doom had been sealed and there was no re-prieve from it.

But Barbara did not notice the expression of his eyes, nor the firmness of his mouth, for she was looking straight in front of her. She had ceased thinking of his friend, she was wondering what she was going to do to-morrow—and all the to-morrows? She had never wondered about this before—but now the whole world seemed changed. He was going to-morrow—and then—? She shivered slightly, and closed her eyes for a moment to keep back the tears.

The next morning had come. Eric’s luggage had been taken by a servant in the cart. Mr. Gordon had already mounted and started on. After Eric had thanked his hostess warmly for her hospitality, she had gone in the house, so

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

he turned to Barbara. Twice he started to speak, but it seemed impossible to utter the words of conventional good-bye. He lifted her hand to his lips hastily, then raised his hat, jumped on his horse and joined Mr. Gordon, without a single backward look.

Eric had left Barbara standing on the grass in front of the house, watching him disappear down the road. When he was quite out of sight, she dropped on the grass where she had been standing and covered her face with her hands. The sun seemed very hot and she felt as if her head were burning up. She lay there some time, nestling her face against the fresh, cool blades of grass. After a little, she sat up, plucking the blades and gathering them in a little pile in her lap. Her fingers suddenly struck something hard.

It was a senior society pin.

“His!” she whispered, remembering.

She jumped up, and ran into the house, holding the pin in her tightly clenched hand.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

In her own room she knelt at the bed, holding the pin up before her. Then tears fell on it and she kissed it again and again, as if it were the golden Key to Heaven left in her possession.

CHAPTER XII.

As the train sped onward, taking Eric homeward, each hour farther and farther away from Barbara, he sat gazing out upon the passing landscape, yet not seeing anything, so absorbed was he in his own thoughts. Slowly and earnestly he reviewed his past life, and he felt ashamed of himself—not for what he had done—for he believed he had always been a gentleman, refraining from follies which even some gentlemen allow themselves, but he knew that he deserved no credit for thus keeping his character pure and honourable, for his ideals had always been so high, that to fall below the standard of a true gentleman, would have made him despise himself. But what made him ashamed now was the thought of the things he had not done. He was twenty-six years old, and what had he accomplished that would place his name above that of the ordi-

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

nary man? What had been his aim in life? Where were his ambitions? He had had none. He had taken life as it had come, easily and indolently, never looking ahead, merely enjoying his wealth and all that society afforded him, and being satisfied. But now there had come a change. He was filled with remorse that he should have thus been content to drift, and finally he bent his head in the gathering twilight, saying idly:

“Life will never be the same for me again. I have found love—but I shall never know love’s gladness.”

His was a nature which needed love, and love alone, to stir it, to arouse it from its former torpor to a new growth and development. Before he could find inspiration for ambitions, he had been unconsciously waiting for his soul’s ideal, and now he had found her. He silently gave himself to her. He altered all of his former conceptions of life and determined henceforth to live but for her. He

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

would accomplish something, would make his name, if not famous, at least known for good things. Though she would never know that he did it for her dear sake, for had he not received his Fate from her own unconscious lips? But, even if the right to tell her was thus forever barred, he would work just the same. *He* would know that he did this, to make himself more worthy of loving her, even though his secret was to go down with him to the grave. He knew that what he could do would only be a hundredth part of what he longed to do, but still, when it was accomplished, it would be a little something.

By the time he had reached his journey's end, so many hours had been spent in thinking, during the long days and also much of the nights, for sleep had come to him but little, he had had time to settle his plans for his future work. He had chosen literature, which he had always considered the noblest of professions.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

It seemed to him a great thing to send out into the world books that would be a help to his fellow-men. Always a student and lover of books, he felt now that whatever talent he might have, should be turned in that direction.

This great step fully determined, he turned eagerly to the details, hoping to so absorb himself that he might forget the almost unendurable longing to return immediately to California. The mysteries and glories of ancient Egypt had always held a great attraction for him, and now, the thought of a book whose scene should be laid in this far-away land appealed to him with irresistible charm. Such a book would involve a great deal of study, which was what he wanted, and the very difficulties connected with it appealed to him now. He would write a story of an Egyptian princess, a fictitious princess of course, yet he would try to make her a type of the true oriental character. Her father should be a

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

Pharaoh, her mother a fair, white slave, dearer to the heart of the haughty Egyptian than all the dark-skinned daughters of his own race. Eric's heroine could therefore inherit what was to his mind the ideal type of beauty, golden hair and a fair skin. It would have seemed to him impossible to write about any beautiful woman and not have her resemble Barbara.

One late afternoon in September, Eric sat at his desk. He had been writing busily all day. Outside, the rain beat drearily on the window panes, his study seemed dark and chilly, corresponding with a melancholy mood which had held him in full possession all day. He rang for a servant to start a fire in the grate. He felt restless and depressed. His book was progressing, but he found little comfort in it, and to-day he believed that it was going to be a failure. And even if it was a success, what would it matter, what would it be to write a mere book, or even many books?

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

It would prove that he had done something for Barbara, but would it be the thing he wanted to do? No, nothing that he could ever accomplish would be that. For the one and only thing he longed for was his freedom, the right to go back to her and try to win her love, and if he could win it, to take her away with him, his own forever. The thought that this happiness would come to some other man, while he must stand aside powerless, sometimes nearly drove him mad. Perhaps even now she loved some one, he himself was nothing to her, and never could be, while the other men were all free. These maddening thoughts had come to him so often and aroused in him such depths of woe, that it seemed as if he could not keep his resolution and obey her command, as if he must write to Edith, asking for his freedom, the freedom which should relieve him from his promise and allow him to follow his heart's longing, back to the Golden State. Edith had gone to Europe early in

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

June and would not be back until late in October.

He went over to the fire and drew up a chair before it. He thought he would sit there a few moments until he had conquered his desperate mood and could put his mind again on his work. As the fire blazed up brightly, it shed a glow of cheer over him and he felt his spirits rise a little.

There was a rap at the door. A servant entered and handed him a letter. The envelope was of heavy white paper exhaling the odour of violets, the writing was that of a woman, bold and stunning. He did not hurry in opening it; but after a few moments when he did, he read as follows:

“ PARIS, Hotel Continental.

Have you forgotten your friends entirely? We hear that you have been back from the West three whole months, but there our information ends. No word from you yourself

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

—what is it? I had hoped you might come over to join us.

Yours as ever,

EDITH.

September first.”

He tossed it into the fire, and heaved a deep sigh.

“That settles it,” he muttered, “She still cares, or she would not write such a note. I should have written to her this summer, I suppose, but why need she have expected me to join her? It is too late for me to join them now—but when she returns—good-bye to these long days and evenings of work. Heavens, I did not realise that these days, dark as they have seemed, have been free and untrammelled, compared to those to come.”

He went quickly back to his desk as if he would begin at once to make the most of the time that was left.

CHAPTER XIII.

ERIC answered Edith's note, but received no reply, he did not know on what steamer she would return, but one afternoon in October he saw her name in the newspaper in a list of those passengers that had landed that morning, and after dinner he went to see her. She greeted him rather coolly.

"Don't let's beat about the bush, Eric," she said, "I know something has happened to you, and I want to hear all about it. I supposed that you would join us in Europe when you returned from California. We saw in the newspaper that you had returned, but you were pleased to remain in New York, or somewhere, anywhere instead of joining us."

"I have been here at home," said Eric.

"Yes, but why?"

"I have been doing some work this summer," he said.

Edith's foot tapped impatiently on the rug.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

A thousand thoughts flashed into her mind, and above all there suddenly came a horrible fear, a fear that she dreaded and yet felt she must face.

“Eric,” she said, her voice was low and full of emotion, “you have fallen in love with someone. It is true. I know it. It is the only thing that could have kept you here, away from me all summer—not that I am fool enough to believe that you would have come because you wanted to see me, but we are engaged, and you are too proud to treat me badly, to let the world see your indifference. Your work alone would not have kept you—and without a word, you even forgot to write to me, until you received my note.”

Eric was taken utterly by surprise, she had read him so thoroughly.

“Tell me,” she said, almost commandingly, “I think I have a right to know.”

He answered her frankly. It was best for both of them that he did, although he had not

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

stopped to consider this. She asked the question suddenly, and he answered as quickly.

“Yes,” he said, “I have fallen in love.”

Edith drew in a deep breath through her closed teeth.

“She lives here in New York, I suppose. Do I know her?”

“No,” said Eric, “you do not know her, for she does not live here.”

“Ah—” said Edith, in a relieved tone. It made a great difference that the girl lived elsewhere. She could see now that Eric had really remained home to work, and not to be near the girl. Edith’s nature was a thoroughly selfish one, probably, if her training had not tended to make her more so, she might have been different, but she had been spoiled from her cradle up, and it was her first impulse to think always of her own desires. She loved Eric, and would rather marry him, even knowing what she did, than to give him up. She gave a little laugh, there was a ring of triumph in

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

it. She told herself that "possession is nine points of the law" and she did not intend to become a martyr and set him free, so that he might marry that other girl. She looked at him with half closed lids and a cruel little smile on her lips. Eric had brought her some roses which she had pinned at her waist; she took one of these and toyed with it idly. Eric was very still and did not look at her, he was watching the coals of the fire near which they sat. "I will not ask you any more about that girl," said Edith, "because she must be forgotten. To confess the truth, as I have always done to you, I still care for you, and we will go on as before—if you say so—do you agree?"

She knew what his answer would be.

"Certainly, if you wish it so," he said.

"I do wish it," said Edith. "I don't know that I care to get married yet—we will wait until next June—for I prefer a June wedding."

The winter passed. One evening in March

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

when Eric had come to dine with her and they had been left alone in the drawing-room, Edith was seated at the piano singing. She finally stopped singing and ran her fingers idly over the keys striking a few soft chords, she was thinking deeply, and she smiled at her thoughts. She had by this time forgotten about that girl, and she thought Eric had; in fact she believed that he was growing to care for her now, he must be, or he would not have been so thoughtful and attentive all the past winter.

“Eric,” she said softly, “June—our wedding—is very near now, only a few more short weeks. Don’t you think you might—don’t you want to—show a little affection for me now?” She glanced up at him appealingly.

His look startled her, his eyes had become a deep grey and flashed like steel, but she went on, in spite of what they told her.

“Eric, you know how I love you,—and I want you to love me—I want you to——”

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

But he interrupted her.

“Please do not say it. Do you not understand?”

She arose and stood very near to him.

“No, I do not understand,” she whispered, “but I want to. I want you to understand how I love you, I want you to show that you care for me. Eric!” she cried, frightened, “you don’t mean—you cannot—still love that other girl?”

“Do not ask me,” said Eric.

“But I must,” said Edith. “Tell me, tell me, I must know!”

“It is true,” replied Eric. “God forgive me, but it is true.”

“True! Oh, Eric, I cannot stand it. I believed that you had forgotten her—I hoped that you—oh, I cannot bear it!” she covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

He led her gently over to a chair. Then he turned and strode back and forth in the room.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

He went to the window and looked out. The rain had begun to fall, and the lights of the Avenue blinked at him mistily through the gloom. A voice within him was whispering mercilessly, as it had that night in California when Barbara had first played to him. The refrain came to him now, he seemed to hear it as plainly as he had then. The words rang through his senses, showing him that their prophecy of that night had come true. He pushed his hair back from his forehead, his lips were closed firmly, he straightened his shoulders, then turned and went over to Edith, who sat dejected and forlorn, weeping silently. "Edith," he said gently, "please do not cry. I wish to heaven that I could be different from what I am, that I could give you the love you say you feel for me. I am vastly unworthy of your love, Edith, and it seems very strange to me that you should feel as you do, but if you do, I will try to make you as happy as I can. If I were the man I was a year ago, I would

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

try and hope to love you, and to be able to show you the affection the man who is to marry you should, but I am not—all the world is changed to me. But if you wish a husband who can give you nothing but his name, protection and worldly wealth, then we will marry and make the best of it.”

They were hard words for him to say, for he knew that if she really did love him, they sounded cruel, but they were the truth, and he felt compelled to say them.

She faltered—for she was torn, as she always had been, between the desire to marry him, and the humiliation her proud heart felt to want a man who did not love her, but her love mastered her, and she replied simply:

“I want to marry you, Eric, I could not live without you.”

“Very well,” he said solemnly, “I will come to see you again to-morrow, but I must go now, it is growing late. Try to forget this evening, and in the future we need not refer

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

to it. Good night." He made a low bow and left her.

When he had gone, she sat very still for a few moments. Then she laughed—long, low peals of laughter—her mood had changed suddenly, as it always did.

"I have had my way!" she said triumphantly. "He will marry me. When he is my husband, I will make him forget that other girl—and he shall love me then, yes, me, me, *me!*"

CHAPTER XIV

JUNE was drawing near. Eric's book was nearly finished now. He wanted to take it to a publisher and get it accepted, if he could, before his marriage. He wanted to feel that he had accomplished one thing at least for Barbara. It would have been simple for him to have published it himself, of course, but he felt a great longing to have this, his first work for the girl he loved, judged on its own merits, so he desired the impartial verdict of a publisher.

Edith had decided that she preferred to have a house wedding at their summer home in Newport. So her family moved down two weeks before the time, and with them the girls who were to be Edith's bridesmaids. Eric went down also and stopped at an hotel, where he was entertaining the men who were to be his ushers. He had his own horses brought

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

down, that he might do his full share in the wedding festivities, being determined to show no lack of courtesy to the woman so soon to be his wife.

One evening, two nights before the wedding, Edith had been giving a dinner. When it was over, tempted by the beauty of the night, the young people had all strolled down to the beach. Edith and Eric had started with them, but Edith went slowly and let the others get on ahead, then she stopped and said to Eric.

“ They will not miss us, let’s go back to the house, I want to be alone. I am tired of having so many people about all the time.”

They went back and sat on the verandah.

“ Do you remember, Eric, that evening last March?” said Edith, looking intently at him. “ The evening that you told me it was impossible for you to show any affection for me? Do you remember all you said then?”

“ Yes,” answered Eric, slowly.

“ And did you really mean it all?”

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“Have I given you reason to believe I did not?”

“N-o,” she replied, hesitatingly, “but I supposed you meant it only—until we should be married. Then, of course, I should think there would be a change.”

“I did not say that.”

“I know you did not say it, but I feel that you must change then.”

“You mistake,” he said in a low tone.

“Then if you still dislike me, if you will *never* love me, why do you marry me?”

“Why? Must I tell you again?”

“Yes, I wish to hear again.”

“Because we are engaged, and you have not broken the engagement, *I* cannot. A man is in honour bound, it is only a girl’s privilege.”

“Do you mean then,” she asked excitedly, “that after we are married you will still be as cold, as cruel, as heartless to me, as you are now?”

“I know,” said Eric, “that I am cold, but

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

I am very sorry if I have been cruel or heartless. I have not meant to be."

"Eric," she pleaded, coming over and putting her hand on his shoulder and lifting her face very near his own, "won't you kiss me then? Can't you show me one bit of tenderness? Eric," she cried passionately, "kiss me now!"

To another man, this would not have been a difficult thing to do—for she was very beautiful, and love shone in her whole being. But Eric sprang up and away from her.

"No, you mistake," he cried, hoarsely, "if you think I will ever kiss you. You do not understand. I will never kiss any one so long as I live. I have vowed never to do that. I thought you understood. I will make you my wife, in the eyes of the world, and do all in my power to make you happy, I never mean to fail you in all the duty and courtesy I should owe my wife,—but you must realise that my life, my thoughts, my heart are my own, and

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

in them you can have no share. If this sounds cruel, forgive me, for I thought you understood, and if you do not, it is better that you should know it now—for I shall not change.”

She walked over to the edge of the piazza and back again, her hands clenched tightly, her whole frame quivering with rage. Back and forth, back and forth she walked rapidly—all the fury of her nature was aroused. She could be savage if she allowed herself. She knew that Eric meant just what he said, and she was overcome with the bitterness of despair.

She stopped suddenly before him.

“It is because you love her so still!” she cried. “Oh, Heavens, will you never forget her? It is because she loves you too—only you were not free. Yet you must have kissed her, at least once, and you wish to keep the remembrance of——”

“Hush!” he cried, in a low, commanding tone. His eyes were dark with angry passion, and she shivered as she met their gaze.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

“ You shall not speak of her,” he went on.
“ You have no right. You may think what you like of me, but not one word of her.”

He walked away from her, going down the steps of the piazza. She went quickly over and looked down at him, he was half way across the lawn, unconscious of where he intended to go.

“ Eric!” she cried, in a sharp, piercing voice. “ Come back, you must, I wish to speak to you.”

“ What is it?” he asked, when he had reached the steps. She ran down and stood in front of him, her eyes were blazing, her face white with rage.

“ I want to tell you that I have changed. I no longer love you. You have made me hate you. You may go. I must have been mad to have thought that I loved you. I was a fool, but I am one no longer. Go, you are free to do as you like.”

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

He had folded his arms and stood calmly looking at her.

“At last I believe you know yourself,” he said, “I have always felt and told you that your feeling for me was not love. I trust, however, that you are equally mistaken in thinking that your present feeling is hatred. For you I have only kindest good wishes, and most sincerely I trust the future will give you all the happiness you deserve. Let us forget the mistakes we have made, and part in peace.”

He held out his hand.

A moment ago she had been trembling with anger, but his gentleness seemed to quiet her, and her one thought now was to end it all with as much dignity as she could summon. So she stretched out her hand and met his.

“Good-bye,” she said, a smile lighting her face. “When we meet again we shall have forgotten, and I hope you will have forgiven—for I need it. Now go, do not say any more—I——” she turned and ran up the steps.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

He looked after her and called good-bye, then he went quickly down the gravel walk and out to the white, moonlit road, dazed with the unexpected happenings of the last half hour. He went back to his hotel, as it was too late to catch a train that night. He locked his door, and sat at the open window, looking out into the still night—he was alone with his freedom!

He sat there for hours, watching the moon slowly pass through the heavens, then the stars disappear one by one, and the dawn approach. As the sun began to rise higher and higher, he told himself that he could now leave, that there was an early train at six-thirty. His first impulse was to take it, but then he thought of his guests, the men staying there with him, and who were to have been his ushers. He must wait and tell them, it would not be courteous to leave them so. He remained by the window until his valet came to take his orders. When the man saw that his master had not been to

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

bed, he was inwardly astonished, but outwardly showed the phlegmatic blindness belonging to any well-trained servant.

Eric ordered him briefly to pack his things, telling him that they would take the tenthirty train for town, and to leave orders to have the horses follow. He changed his clothes, and joined his friends in the dining-room. They all sat at one table, and he told them simply that Edith had broken the engagement, and so, of course, the wedding would not take place. There was that in his manner which made them understand that there were to be no questions asked and no further information given.

Reaching the city, Eric drove directly to his house, deposited in his desk the manuscript of his story, which had suddenly lost much of its value to him, and left town on the midnight train for the west—and Barbara!

CHAPTER XV

THE long journey seemed to drag itself out endlessly. Would he never reach California? The days he spent in the smoking compartment, gazing blankly out of the window, with only a cigar for company, as the other men saw that he did not care to join in their games of cards, they let him alone. The nights he spent tossing restlessly about in his berth, for he could sleep but little, longing for the morning that would bring him one day nearer. Would she be there just as he had left her? Or would she perhaps—have married? It was a whole year ago that he had left California, and he knew many things could happen in a year, but it was too agonising to him to face the possibility of her having married, so he put it away from him, assuring himself that she would be there, heart-free as when he rode away so mournfully twelve months before. Should he be able to win her? Not at first, perhaps, but

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

he would live on his sister's ranch where the men were working, and see Barbara every day and patiently woo her. If she should at first refuse him, he would tell her, "If you think I am not worthy of you—which I know I am not—I will try day and night to become more so, I will make myself what you shall will me to be—anything will be possible to a love like mine."

One of the nights, when he lay tossing about, he let his imagination picture their life together, if Barbara would consent to marry him. He planned what he would do for her, the home he would build for her, the beauty with which he would surround his wife. He would make her life one long blissful reality, there was no pleasure that she should not enjoy, no happiness that she should not feel to the utmost. And he would stand between her and all troubles, no care should ever come near her, she should never know a single hardship of life, he would keep her in a little Paradise of their

SYLVIA: *The* STORY *of*

own. His joy was so exquisite as he let his thoughts dwell on the future, his imagination took him beyond even the possibilities of human power, nor did his dreaming stop with this life; he felt that he would take her with him to the farthest star in the Heavens and there they would abide together forever. Eternity itself did not seem long enough for him to look forward to in his existence with her.

At last he reached San Diego. He sent his luggage to an hotel and hastily procured a horse and started toward Mr. Gordon's ranch. Though the poor horse did his best, it seemed to Eric that he went along no faster than at a snail's pace. He looked eagerly ahead of him, noticing the familiar land-marks of the road he had traversed with Barbara. He was all impatience to catch sight of the house and see if he could not discover her on the front verandah.

“As soon as I have greeted the others,” he

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

said, "I will ask Barbara to come at once with me to one of those little rustic benches in the garden. This time I will not have to cloak my love in the disguise of a friend, I can tell her the whole truth. I will pour out to her my very soul—and she will have to listen. Ah, I can see her dear face now, as she turns it to me, those wonderful grey eyes of hers looking into mine. They may be filled with surprise at first, they may not respond to mine with the love I crave—not at first perhaps—but soon, ah yes, soon. I will not let her wait long before giving me the love I shall demand. She *must* love me, it shall come to her suddenly and overwhelmingly."

He reached the entrance to the garden and looked anxiously towards the house. There were no signs of a slender, white-clad figure; the only person he saw was Mr. Gordon, who sat on the front steps smoking a pipe and listlessly watching him approach.

Eric jumped from his horse, threw the reins

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

over a post and advanced eagerly toward Mr. Gordon.

"How do you do?" he said. "You remember me, do you not? Eric Fielding?"

Mr. Gordon looked up at him without rising. His expression for a moment was one of blank astonishment, then he smiled, and motioned Eric to sit down beside him.

"Yes, yes," he said, "sit down, won't you?"

So intent was Eric on his quest that he did not notice the great change in Mr. Gordon. The man who, a year ago, was a perfect type of a hale and hearty middle-aged gentleman, with ruddy cheeks, bright eyes and hair scarcely grizzled, looked now like a man twenty years older. His cheeks were pale and sunken, his form bent, and his hair nearly white, but the most striking change was found in his eyes, they were vacant, expressionless, and every now and again a wild stare came from them.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“How is your wife?” asked Eric, as he seated himself, “and how is Miss Barbara?”

Mr. Gordon looked again at him in the same stupefied manner.

“My wife—” he said slowly, “why she is dead; last March she died, buried in the churchyard yonder.”

“Oh, I am so very very sorry,” said Eric. “How dreadfully hard it must be. You have my deep sympathy.”

“Thank you,” said Mr. Gordon, a deep shade of melancholy and unutterable loneliness overspreading his face. Eric was silent a moment, then he asked,

“But your niece, Miss Barbara, she is here and well, is she not?” Mr. Gordon looked over at him sadly.

“Barbara is dead also; she died at the same time that my wife died. Come,” he said rising slowly, “I will show you her grave. She was buried here in the garden, for she always loved it so. She lies under the jessamines. I go

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

there every day to water the poor little flowers. How she did love them! That's why they covered her grave with them. Barbara was a good little girl. And my wife, how dear she was to me! I am lonely now that they are gone, there is no one left here but strangers."

Eric staggered after him down the path. He looked blankly down upon the spot of white blossoms to which Mr. Gordon pointed. "You see it?" said Mr. Gordon. "You are sorry?" he asked, as he turned and led the way back to the house. "You knew Barbara and liked her? Every one liked her, I am lonely now."

Eric drew himself together with an effort and tried to answer.

"You must be indeed," he said. "Can I do anything for you?"

"No, there is nothing," replied Mr. Gordon. "These strangers take good care of me."

Eric put his hand up to his head, a terrible dizziness was overpowering him. He leaned against a pillar of the piazza a moment, trying

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

to realise the truth. It seemed as if he must be dreaming some horrible dream from which he would awaken suddenly, but as he glanced about the old familiar place, as he looked down at the man so near him, and then over at the little patch of white jessamine flowers, he knew that it was not a dream, but cold, stern reality.

“I must be going,” he said suddenly. “If I can ever do anything, you will let me know, will you not?”

He went over to his horse and mounted quickly. “Good-bye,” he said, as he turned toward the gate and down the long, narrow road back to San Diego. When he reached the hotel, he found there was a train which left at seven. He hurriedly jumped into a trap with his luggage and went to the station, as there was not a moment to spare. He must not miss that train, he must catch it and be moving, moving—he cared not where—but he could not remain there or stay still another moment.

CHAPTER XVI

NIZZA-LA-BELLA, as its inhabitants, more Italian than French, like to call it, is a small amphitheatre. North, east and west are the hills and mountains, and at the south is the sea. It is one of the fairest spots on the Riviera, the pearl of the Mediterranean.

Though the roses and flowers were in their prime, and Nice looked her fairest, the weather was beginning to grow so warm that most of the owners of the villas and spacious mansions had closed them and gone north to Switzerland or some cooler spot for the summer months.

The Baroness sat in one of the shaded salons of her niece's villa. She was looking delightfully cool in a summer silk morning dress, with her hat and gloves on as if ready for a drive.

She glanced impatiently at the clock on the mantel, then she laughed a little, saying to her companion:

"It is unusual for me to be ready nearly

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

half an hour before the time. But I am so eager to see Sylvia, I had to get ready early even if I must sit about waiting till the time to go."

"Perhaps it is not too early to start now," said her companion, who was none other than Dick Ames. "The train arrives at eleven, and it is now nearly ten-thirty."

"Then let us go," said the Baroness eagerly.

They went out and entered an open landau and told the coachman to take them to the station.

"I did not tell you, did I, the reason Sylvia is coming back now?" asked the Baroness.

"No," replied Dick. "I imagined that she was going to remain there indefinitely to be with her uncle."

"She did feel it her duty, after her aunt's death, but the last letter I had from her, just before the cable saying she was coming home immediately, told me of a dreadful accident her uncle had had. He fell from his horse,

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

and though he recovered physically in a few days, he was affected mentally, and the physicians said he would remain that way always. His memory was gone. Though he seemed to remember that his wife had died, he also believed Sylvia was dead and recognised none of his old friends. As he took a dislike to Sylvia, thinking her a stranger, she felt her presence had become an annoyance to him instead of a help.

Perhaps you may think it strange, Mr. Ames, but I have never told any one where Sylvia has been this past year. I have merely said that she has been visiting friends. Sylvia wrote me that she had told you the cause of her leaving me. I will confess to you that the reason I have not cared to speak of her whereabouts is that I felt hurt that she should leave me and go to her relatives in America merely because of a few angry, thoughtless words of mine. I am going to ask her if she will not mention it either—her having been to America

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

—for if she should tell even that much, I feel it would place me in such an uncomfortable light. You understand, do you not?”

“You may be sure, Baroness, that I have not spoken of it to any one. Though when in Venice, just after her departure, I did tell Philip Monroe, the friend who is here with me now, you know, that she had gone to America; but of course I did not tell the reason, and I am sure he has not spoken of her whereabouts to anyone.”

“That is well,” said the Baroness. “There is no reason why it should be talked of. Every one has gone away now, and Sylvia and I will probably leave directly for Switzerland, and when we return in the autumn, it will be so natural to have her here with me, that they will have forgotten that she has been away for over a year, and I want to forget it myself. I have learned how dear that child is to me, and I don’t care to remember the past year.”

They had reached the station and had to

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

wait but a very few moments before the train arrived, from which Sylvia alighted.

“But why,” said the Baroness when they had returned to the villa, Dick having taken his departure and they were comfortably seated at luncheon, “why did you not tell me in your letter, or cable me, what steamer you were to take? For I could have met you in Liverpool.”

“I did not want to give you all that trouble,” answered Sylvia, “for what would have been the use? I had Maria, who went with me, you know, and we managed beautifully.”

“You are such an independent child,” said the Baroness, looking at her fondly. “As I wrote in my letter, Sylvia, I am very sorry for all I said that day. I did not realise how unjust I was, and I beg your pardon.”

“You know it is granted, auntie dear,” said Sylvia, coming around the table and kissing her. “I told you in my letter that it was entirely granted.”

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“Oh, child, how good it is to have you again!” said the Baroness. “I have missed you more than I can say, and if you will only stay with me now, you need never marry—not even if a hundred dukes come to ask you.”

Sylvia laughed.

“What happened to the Duke?”

“Well, I did not tell him where you had gone, but said you would probably not return for some time. He waited about for a while, then evidently gave you up and went back to England. I have learned my lesson, Sylvia, I shall never in the future want you to marry against your will. You shall marry if you fall in love, but never until.”

“Thank you, auntie,” said Sylvia, a little wistfully, looking out toward the garden through one of the low French windows.

“I have planned a trip to Switzerland,” said the Baroness. “You will like it, shall you not?”

SYLVIA: *The* STORY *of*

“Oh, yes,” said Sylvia, “No one likes Nice in mid-summer.”

After luncheon Sylvia superintended the unpacking of her trunks, though there were but two, as her wardrobe had been a comparatively small one in California.

“The gowns you left here are all still hanging in their closets,” said the Baroness, “but I fear they are horribly out of style now.”

“They must be,” said Sylvia, “but I will continue to wear these while I keep on my mourning for Aunt Anne. Oh, how good it is to be back again, auntie, how good it is!”

CHAPTER XVII

AFTER a quiet summer in Switzerland, the Baroness and Sylvia returned to their home in Nice, but they mingled very little in society during the winter on account of Sylvia's mourning, which she felt very little inclined to lay aside, so real to the girl's warm heart was the grief for the death of her aunt, of whom she had been so fond. But when spring came, she yielded to the desire of the Baroness that she should lay aside her mourning, and they turned their steps toward Paris, the Mecca for all wardrobe-seeking femininity.

When back again in Nice, it was not long before they were in the full whirl of the gaieties, so glad were their friends to welcome them once more. It was just before the Carnival and the season was at its height.

Dick was there, and Philip with him. They had been in Nice for nearly two years now, as Dick had several contracts for erecting new

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

buildings in and about Nice, and Philip had remained with him, glad of the pretext that allowed him to be near Sylvia.

One evening, as Philip entered Dick's room in the hotel, he found him opening a package which had just come from America.

"Look at this, Philip," he said. "Leigh Dunlop has just returned home, you know, and he has sent me this. A new book, and who do you think is the author? Eric Fielding, by Jove! Leigh writes that it has been out since last summer, but he had not seen it until his return."

Philip took the book and turned over a few pages.

"It seems to be a story of Egypt," he said.

"Yes, Leigh writes that Eric had it published last July, then left immediately for Egypt to be gone for an indefinite period. He is supposed to be looking up some new data. He has evidently gone Egypt mad. Think of our old friend Eric having become a liter-

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

ary man! Leigh writes that every one is crazy over this book, and says it is the best one that has been written for years, the style is so superb. I think that I shall sit down and read it at once."

"But you are all dressed for the ball at the Baroness'," said Philip.

"*And* the Countess'," added Dick, looking at Philip and smiling. "You start on, if you want to, and I will join you later."

Philip reached the ball at about nine. He found the Baroness in one of the ball-rooms talking to the few guests who had already arrived, but he did not see Sylvia. He went up to the Baroness and stood near her a few moments, wondering where Sylvia could be. His glance wandered about the room and through the open doors. Outside he could see the lanterns hanging on the trees and a number of small tables and chairs on the lawn where the supper was to be served. Suddenly he saw the dainty white-clad figure for which

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

his eyes were seeking. He hurried out to join her.

“ May I come out with you? ” he asked as he drew near Sylvia.

“ Yes, surely, ” she answered, smiling. “ I should be in there, I suppose, but as so few have come as yet, I thought I would slip out here and see that everything was in order. You can help me with a critical eye. ”

“ I have nothing to criticise, ” he said, “ it is all so perfect. ” He was looking at her with such an adoring glance, that the colour came to her cheeks, for she could not help reading what was in his eyes.

“ Don't you think it is pleasanter to have supper served out here under the trees, than in the dining-room? ” asked Sylvia.

“ Oh, very much, ” replied Philip, looking about at the scene admiringly.

“ Over in that grove, ” went on Sylvia, where the tables are too far from the house for the people to hear the orchestra, I have a harp

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

and two violins. They haven't begun yet. I suppose they are waiting until eleven, when supper will be served. But let's go over and have them play now. I like a harp and two violins more than a full orchestra."

They went over to the grove, and at a word from the Countess the men began playing. They were masters of their instruments, and the music was far better than that ordinarily heard at a ball.

"We will sit here just a moment to listen, if you like," said Sylvia, "then I shall have to go back to the house."

They sat at one of the little empty tables. Philip leaned across and spoke.

"Sylvia, may I tell you what I think?"

"Why, yes," she answered.

"I think you are the most beautiful woman in the whole world. A man would be willing to die for a gracious few moments such as you are giving me now. When I see you as I do to-night, I realise more than ever the utter im-

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

possibility of giving up hope of some day winning you. While I live I must love you, while your heart is free, I must hope that some day you may learn to love me."

"Oh, pray do not, Philip. Believe me, I have answered you once and for always. Your friendship is so much to me, but believe me, that is all there can ever be."

"I know you think so now," he answered, "but until you tell me yourself you love someone else, I will not give up hope."

"I cannot prevent your hoping," said Sylvia, "but truly, it is useless. But I must go back to the house now, Philip; will you come?"

When they reached the house, many more guests had arrived, so that Philip lost track of Sylvia and tried to content himself with wandering about the different rooms, watching the dancers, or walking up and down on one of the terraces outside. It did not occur to him to ask any of the other women there to dance—perhaps if he had seen any of them

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

who lacked partners, he might have remembered his duty, but there seemed to be none of this kind, so he felt himself free to wander about alone with his dreams.

The villa was a comparatively new one. Sylvia's father had built it for her upon her joining him in Italy after her mother's death. They had at first stayed in Florence on her father's estate there, but Sylvia had taken a great fancy to Nice, and longed to make that her home. She liked Americans much more than Italians, and in Nice she knew she would meet many of them. Her father had been very fond and proud of this, his only child, and as he had great ambitions for her as well as the wealth to carry out any plan he formed, he built the villa in the most superb style. The gardens were like Fairy-land, and surpassed in beauty almost any that could be found even in that land of flowers. The house itself was immense, though only of two stories. The first contained several large salons for dancing.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

three drawing rooms for smaller entertainments, a huge library whose walls were covered with books, and whose windows formed alcoves with cushioned seats, the cosiest of places, inviting a lover of books to spend a rainy morning or even a whole day in their luxuriant seclusion. There were three dining-rooms, a large one for dinner parties, a small one for use when the family was alone, and then a pretty little breakfast-room furnished in blue delf. On the floor above were the sleeping chambers. There were two wings to the villa, one, where the kitchen was placed, above which were the servants' quarters. The other wing contained only one room, a long one, more like a gallery than anything else. This was Sylvia's own private sanctuary, and was never entered by any one else unless at her express invitation. It was called the picture gallery because of the family portraits which hung on its walls. The room was hung with tapestry on the walls between the portraits,

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

rugs lay on the polished floor, and there were many low ottomans and window seats. One window, opening on a balcony overlooking the garden, was placed so high in the wall that a short flight of steps was necessary to reach it. On tables and shelves lay Sylvia's collection of gifts from different friends, or knick-knacks that she had picked up at different places herself. She was very fond of collecting these things, and there was a sentiment connected with each one. On one table lay her violin, the dearest of all her treasures. And about the whole apartment hung the indefinable charm that belongs to the favoured room of a young girl with artistic taste and unlimited wealth to gratify it.

In the mean time, Dick had seated himself in a comfortable chair and read the book through. It took him only about three hours, though it was rather a long book, but he was a very rapid reader.

“By Jove!” he said, as he arose and put on

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

his overcoat, slipping the volume in his pocket. "That is mighty clever. I did not know dear old Eric had it in him. I wish I could do something of this kind instead of drudging along planning buildings. I will take it to Sylvia, I fancy she would like it."

But when he reached the villa, it was nearly midnight; the ball was at its height, and leaving his coat and hat in the dressing-room Dick completely forgot the book and carried it back with him when he went home.

CHAPTER XVIII

PHILIP had had one dance with Sylvia, but dared not ask for another, realising how many of her other guests wanted her, and he had been wandering aimlessly about for some time, when he caught sight of Dick who had just come in. He hurried over and joined him.

“You seem relieved to see me,” said Dick. “What is the matter, has the fair lady been cold?”

“No,” said Philip, a shade of annoyance passing over his face, “she has been as kind as ever, only I have felt I should not bother her much. Naturally at her own house she has so many to think of.”

“True,” said Dick. “I won’t bother her either, but we will stand together and watch her from afar.”

“Why is it that you always seem to be laughing at me?” asked Philip. “Do I wear my heart on my sleeve and make a fool of my-

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

self over her? *You* know I love her, and naturally she knows it, I have told her so many times, and of course I suppose I do show it, but does every one see it as you do—and laugh at me?”

“Certainly not,” said Dick, “and I really do not laugh at you. I am amused, of course, but I am sure others are not; they are so used to believing every man in love with *la bella Sylvia*, that they think nothing of it.”

“Then you think every one sees that I am? I had not meant they should. I certainly never speak of her to any one except you.”

“I know that, my dear boy, but it is merely that you are so far gone, it would be impossible for you to hide it. When a man has given his whole heart to a woman, unless he is very cautious, every one knows it. Do you ever dance with any of these other girls? Do you ever call on them, unless you owe them a duty call? Do you ever take them driving, or to the theatre, or show them attentions of any de-

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

scription? Do you ever do anything more than bow to them, or speak a few words of greeting when you happen to meet them? Do you ever look at them a second time, or know that they are in the same room with you, or even notice that they exist? No; you never do any of these things. They perhaps notice you, and would like to know you, you are good looking and wealthy—two qualities sure of bringing a flutter to the feminine heart—but these facts are of no avail to the poor outcasts, you are as unconscious of their presence as if they were so many leaves on a tree. Your whole time, your thoughts, your words and your eyes are taken up with one, and one only—*Sylvia*. Is this not true?”

“Yes,” admitted Philip.

“Ah, you acknowledge the truth of my statement. Well, then, admitting these facts, can you really blame the world for imagining you admire the Countess, to put it mildly?”

“Perhaps you are right,” said Philip, “but

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

just the same, I do not care to have all the world read my story."

"Then remodel yourself, old man, and become cautious. Hide your feelings, do not stand about like a lost soul when the Countess happens to be led into the next room by her partner, out of your range of vision. Cease hurrying excitedly about to find where she is and whom she is with when you have perchance for a moment lost sight of her. Shake off that deep melancholy into which you fall when you are forced to face the inevitable—when she has gone in to supper with another man, and you cannot possibly approach her or watch her for at least half an hour! Do not——"

"Oh, enough, enough!" cried Philip. "You can always manage to hit the nail on the head, but be satisfied with that, do not drive it in. I admit I am a fool, madly in love with a girl who does not care a bit for me—but let every one see it—I do not care. It would be

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

impossible for me to do differently. Why, shouldn't a fellow act as he feels? They may laugh at me if they like."

"I repeat that they do not laugh at you," said Dick seriously. "They may see that you are in love, but they do not laugh. Why should they? As I said, they are used to it—all the other men——"

"Yes, the others too," said Philip, gloomily, "why torture me by reminding me of all those others?"

"I did not mean it as a torture, I merely meant that your case is only a natural one. There is no reason for you to feel unhappy at the thought of the others. Can't you see that she does not favour them any more than she does you?"

"I do not know," said Philip, troubled. "She is very good to me, I know, but sometimes I fear she likes some of them. Ah, look at her now, look at the man with whom she is dancing. See the bewitching smile she gives

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

him, she is whispering something to him, she smiles and talks to them all that way. Oh, it is maddening!"

"But, my dear fellow, why shouldn't she? It is her nature to be generous, and surely if she must talk to them, you would not want her to frown upon them?"

"But why need she look at them that way? There is a world of warmth in one of her glances."

"Yes, I know," muttered Dick.

"And I would to Heaven," went on Philip not having heard, "that she would give them all to me. I am jealous of her very smiles and glances. Look at Lord Raleigh; they have stopped dancing, and he has her bouquet, he is looking as if he owned her, he seems supremely happy—he has no right. He is your cousin; you know about his chances, do you not, she will not take him?"

"No, she will not take him, poor fellow," said Dick. "He has wanted her even longer"

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

than you have, but I am sure he has no chance."

"Thank God," said Philip. He had implicit faith in Dick's judgment. "And what do you think of Prince Paul of Rome? He met her in Switzerland last summer, and has been intruding himself ever since."

"He really is your most formidable rival," said Dick cruelly. "He is one of the wealthiest princes of Italy, outside of the blood royal. And you can see how good-looking he is, and they say he has a very fascinating way with women." Dick looked at Philip, he knew he was teasing him, but the look on Philip's face made him suddenly cease to enjoy the sport. "But listen to me, Philip, she will not take the Prince, she will never care for him, nor any of these men. They are all fine fellows, but mark my words, when Sylvia falls in love it will be with an American. Though she lives here in France and in Italy, and though most of these people are Europeans, her heart is American."

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

Her mother was American. Sylvia was born and reared there, and if she ever marries, she will choose one of our countrymen. Her taste has always been of the best, and she will surely use it when she decides to marry. Therefore, old man, cheer up, your chances are greater than any of these."

Philip's face brightened, he looked at Dick gratefully.

"You are a brick," he said. "You can make a fellow feel as if he really had some chance, and by Jove, I will not give up until I see her married to another man!"

"That is right, old fellow, a girl likes persistency in a man more than almost anything else. Never grow discouraged, and I think you may win her."

"But I must leave you now," continued Dick, "for I am hungry. I am going to find some one and ask her to go to supper with me."

Philip went across the room and stepped out on to the verandah. He saw Sylvia coming

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

up the steps with Lord Raleigh. Apparently they had been for a little stroll after their dance. Philip went over and spoke to her.

“May I have this dance?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

As Philip glided about to the soft strains of the waltz, with Sylvia so near him that her breath fanned his cheek, and he was conscious of the fragrance of the violets in her hair, it seemed as if he lived but for moments such as these, and that his every thought should be one of gratitude that he was allowed this much, and that he should be humbly satisfied.

But when he had to leave her, and she was taken off on the arm of another man, these feelings left him, and he was filled again with a deep melancholy, and a jealous envy of all those others who claimed as much as he did, and his heart was hungry for the impossible.

CHAPTER XIX

FINALLY the ball was over, the last guest had reluctantly taken his departure, the music had ceased, and a deep stillness reigned. It was after four o'clock, and the sun had begun to rise. Sylvia went over to her window a moment and stood watching the sun mounting above the trees. She drew in a deep breath of the pure morning air.

"After all," she whispered, "it is a beautiful world. I must be happy in having so many good friends. Why does Philip love me? Why does Lord Raleigh and the Prince and—oh, why is it? I do not encourage them, do I? And why do they begin in the first place? Why should they love me instead of some other girl? I am sorry that they do—and yet—and yet—" an adorable little smile crept over her face, "what girl could help being a little glad too, that they should? It is good to be loved!"

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

Oh, I fear that I am not *very* sorry that they do."

She turned and went over to the bed, and fell into a deep slumber, from which she did not wake until long after noon.

She sat up in bed and looked across at the little clock on her dressing-table.

"Three o'clock! Dear me, how very very, lazy I am!" She rang a bell to summon her maid.

"Jeannette, no one has called yet, I hope?"

"No, Mademoiselle," said Jeannette.

"Good, I am not expecting anybody, but I shouldn't like to have any one come and have to be told that I am still in bed. Has Aunt Lucia come down-stairs?"

"No, not yet."

"Well, I want to hurry, I have slept quite long enough."

When Sylvia was dressed, she went down-stairs and wandered from room to room to see if the house was restored to order. Her serv-

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

ants were well trained and had done their work so thoroughly that not a trace of the gaieties of the night before could be seen, everything was in as perfect order as if there had been no ball. Sylvia went to her picture gallery and closed the door. She took up her violin and began to play. She rarely let a day pass without coming there and spending an hour or two playing her beloved instrument. She went over one air after another and finally Werner's Farewell—but she laid the instrument down, for her hands had begun to tremble, and the notes would not come.

“Oh, can I never play it through without—without——”

She went over to a low ottoman and threw herself down, burying her face in her hands.

“Dearest,” she whispered, “will you never come? Am I never to meet you again? I know not where you are, I have not heard of you or from you for two long weary years, and even when I did see you out there in California,

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

you did not care for me. After you went away you forgot me entirely, I am sure of it, for, a man who cared, even a little, would have come back, and you never came. To think that after all, I love a man who cares nothing for me! Is it love? Ah, yes, I know it is, for never has it ceased, although I have tried and tried to forget, but it has remained with me in spite of myself. Every day and every night it haunts me, no matter where I go, no matter what I do or think, underneath everything is this love, burning, burning, like a bed of coals, sometimes blazing up, sometimes only smouldering, but never going out. For the men who love women in vain, Heaven have pity, for they deserve it, I know how they suffer."

She arose quickly, pushing back the hair from her forehead.

"I will not allow myself to be miserable," she said defiantly. "I have too many blessings for that—I will count them—oh, there are so many. God is very good to me, even if He does

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

not bring *him* to me. I am nothing but a child—as Eric called me—to cry thus, and a foolish one. It was the music, it stirs me so. And that song above all others, how it brings back those days in California when I played for him. No one has ever heard me play since—and no one shall. I have promised him in my heart that I will never play for any one until he comes, and I can play for him. And if he does not come, if the song is true—‘God guard thee, dear, it was too fair a dream, God guard thee, dear, it cannot, cannot be,’ if the song is true—oh, Heaven have mercy.”

She forgot her determination for a second, then she remembered, and shut her eyes tightly to force back the tears.

“It is the song,” she said, “when I think of it, I am weak—but I will not be—see—I will play it through—entirely through, and not stop once or let one tear come. I shall finish it triumphantly with a smile.”

She picked up her violin again and began

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

playing it. She played it with a fire and passion that she had never before shown, and when she had finished, she was smiling victoriously.

“If one has the will, one can do anything,” she said delightedly.

There was a knock at the door. Sylvia opened it and saw her aunt standing there.

“I thought I would find you here, dear,” she said. “You foolish child, why did you rise so early?”

“Oh, but I did not, auntie, I have only been here a few moments.”

“Then I feel better. I was afraid you had been up for hours, and so cheated yourself of your rest to come in here to practise. I cannot understand why you will spend so much time practising, when you have given up playing for any of us. But I must not forget what I came for. Dick is here to take you to drive, and I told him I would try to find you.”

“I will come,” said Sylvia.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

Dick was waiting for her on the piazza ; he had left his horses with the groom.

“ Will you go with me ? ” he asked.

“ Yes, indeed, I should love to go.”

“ Good. And, oh, by the way, I have something here for you. It is something I liked very much and wanted you to have.”

He handed her Eric's book.

As she glanced at it and saw whose name was on the cover, she stood very still for a moment, scarcely daring to breathe for fear Dick would observe her agitation, for he was very quick at noticing everything. She opened it and turned over a few pages and said in a steady voice :

“ It looks very attractive, thank you so much, I shall be ever so glad to read it.”

“ I like it for two reasons,” said Dick. “ First, it is a very good story, and second, I know the author, he is an old friend of mine, so of course I take an unusual interest in his book.”

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“ You know the author ? ” asked Sylvia, trying to say it calmly and naturally. “ How interesting, what is he like ? ”

“ He is one of the finest fellows I know, ” said Dick, enthusiastically. “ He is magnificent, morally, mentally and physically. ”

“ Oh, ” said Sylvia, “ you make me wish that I knew him. ”

“ You would like him, I feel sure. If he ever comes here, I will be sure to introduce him to you, if I may. I should like him to know you. But just now he has buried himself in Egypt. ”

“ Egypt ! ” she exclaimed, involuntarily giving a little start, which fortunately Dick did not observe. “ Why there ? ”

“ His book is about Egypt, and I fancy he wants to learn more of the country for his next book. He will probably go on writing more ; he is not the kind of fellow to be satisfied with a beginning. I think he will keep on until he proves himself, if not a genius, at least great. I believe his name will some day be famous, ”

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

even this book should do that for him. But can we go now? it is already growing a little late."

"Yes, I will get my hat and be down directly."

She left him and hurried up to her room.

"Oh," she cried joyously, "I have something of his—his—at last! And I have heard something of him, oh, was ever any one as happy as I am?" She looked at the book devouringly, and pressed it lovingly to her lips, then laid it on her dressing-table.

"When I come back from the drive," she said, "I will read you entirely through."

Sylvia liked Dick very much and always enjoyed driving with him. The afternoon air was fresh and exhilarating, and his conversation was interesting, as always, but this afternoon it seemed to her as if he were taking her for an unusually long drive, and his voice sounded dim and far away. She scarcely knew what he was saying, though she tried to answer him

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

rationally. But she could think of nothing but the book which lay at home in her own room—*his* book, and now hers.

When at last Dick drew up before her house and bade her good-bye, she for the first time realised what he was saying, and she threw much more ardour than was necessary in her thanks for the drive, for in her heart she was thanking him for at last bringing her home.

She ran up the stairs and flew into her own room like a small whirlwind. Yes, there it lay, just where she had left it. She caught it up and hurried over to a divan.

“Ah, this book is sweeter than any of my dreams,” she said. “I never supposed he would write a book—but he has—God bless him—and I have it here. Every single word is his very own. And there is his dear name printed out on the cover, and there is the publisher’s name to whom he took it, with ‘New York’ underneath. At last I have a part of

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

him. I can read it over and over and learn each word by heart and make it a part of myself. I can know him so much better by knowing his book."

It was half-past five when she began to read, and the time slipped quickly by until a rap at the door interrupted her.

"Come in," she said.

It was a maid to announce dinner.

"It is seven o'clock, Mademoiselle," she said, "and the Baroness wished me to tell you that she awaits you in the library, as dinner is served."

"Dinner? Oh, I had forgotten. There is no company to-night, is there?" she asked, jumping up and looking down at her gown, wondering if it would do."

"No, Mademoiselle."

"Very well, then, I will come down at once."

At dinner her aunt was talking to her, but Sylvia answered vaguely.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“What is so absorbing your thoughts?” asked the Baroness at last. “I have asked you several questions, and you have given me the most unsatisfactory answers. I think you must be in the clouds.”

“I am,” said Sylvia, laughing. “I have been reading a book—an interesting one. I am full of it.”

“Oh, that explains it,” said her aunt. “I wish I could get as interested in reading as you can, child. But the Italian literature has little attraction for me, nor has the English either, for that matter. I presume this is English, is it not? I never saw you so overcome by anything that was Italian.”

“American!” exclaimed Sylvia, proudly.

“Oh!” the Baroness frowned a little. “You are crazy over your America. Even its literature eclipses all that of our country—and the Americans themselves—I believe you care more for one of those American gentlemen—Mr. Monroe, for instance—than you do for all the

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

Italians, the French and the English who adore you."

"Yes," said Sylvia, "I like Philip better than all the others put together. He is an American, and he lives in New York—in New York—ah, you do not know New York? Well, neither do I, as I have merely passed through there, but I know it is a beautiful city."

Her aunt gave a little sigh. Her niece was too much of a puzzle to her. How, when she had all these Europeans at her feet, men of title and estates, she could prefer a simple American, was more than the Baroness could understand, and occasionally she felt grieved that it should be so, for she was herself every inch an Italian and could not share her niece's feelings in the least. But she had learned the lesson of tolerance, and she never complained that this should be so. She did not complain—but merely sighed on occasions.

As soon as dinner was finished, Sylvia hurried back to her room. She finished the

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

volume and closed it with a deep sigh of satisfaction. "It is beautiful," she said, "marvellous, I love it—every word. How strange that the Princess should have hair like mine—and eyes like mine. Ah, I am glad, for he must like that kind!"

CHAPTER XX

THREE years had passed since Eric had come to Egypt. He had written more books and sent them home to his publishers. Only occasionally had he stopped in Cairo or Alexandria, and then but for a few days at a time, for he had not wanted to be with people. He wanted to wander about alone, keeping in the world of literature by the books which he had sent to him from time to time. He had pitched a tent at the edge of the desert, stayed in some lonely, out-of-the-way hamlet, wandered about near the Pyramids, studied ancient ruins and tombs, had ridden camels and horses, anything to be away from people and near to Nature.

He did not try to forget his love, he knew that he could never do that, if he should try with all his strength, and he did not wish to forget, for he had faith that he might join Barbara when death should be kind enough to take him. Not that he longed for death, or was

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

seeking it, he was too manly to do that, he wanted to do good work in the world, and as it was right that he should live, he did not allow himself to be melancholy. But time made no difference to his heart, Barbara was still to him as she had been from the beginning, a living presence, the only woman he had ever loved, and passing years made him realise afresh that she was the only woman he could love.

But as time passed, he again had a desire to see his sister and his old friends. Rumours had come to him on the few occasions when he had stopped in one of the cities, that his books had succeeded far beyond his greatest hopes, and it was only human that he should want to go back and see if this was true. So he returned. He went directly to his sister, who was living at Nice. He did not let her know of his coming, but walked in on her one afternoon as she sat in her cool, dimly-lighted library. His tall form filled the doorway and

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

she looked up, not recognising him at first, the light was so dim, the blinds being closed to keep out the warm June air. When she did finally discover that it was her brother, she hurried over to him with a delighted cry.

“Eric, my dear, dear boy,” she said, “*you*—of all people! It does my heart good to see you. Mercy, how long it is since I have!”

They spent all the afternoon asking and answering the many questions that came to each of them after their long separation. When they were at the dinner table, Miss Fielding said,

“I think Nice is delightful, there are such charming people here, and so many Americans. Two very good friends of yours are here, and have been for several years, Dick Ames and Philip Monroe.”

“Good!” said Eric, “I want to see them.”

“That reminds me,” went on his sister, “how could I have forgotten it! You have come just in time to see a dramatisation of one

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

of your books—the first one. You remember Mr. Ames wrote you and received your permission to dramatise it. Some of the society people gave it here several months ago for a charity, and now they are to give it again, in fact this very evening. How very fortunate that you came to-day. We must hurry if we are to reach the theatre on time. I have a box already engaged, but I do not want you to be late, for you will want to see it all.”

But they did not reach the theatre until the end of the first act, as the heavy plush curtains fell together again after the final curtain call.

Those who were taking part had gone to their dressing-rooms to prepare for the next act, and Dick stood on the stage watching the men place the scenery, then he went over and took a survey of the auditorium.

“Great Scott, if that isn’t Eric!” he exclaimed.

He hurried around to see him, but could only remain a few moments as he was stage man-

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

ager and had to be back for the second act. The girl who was taking the part of the Princess came from her dressing-room and stood in one of the wings waiting—it was Sylvia. She wore the magnificent jewelled robes of an Egyptian princess, her hair fell in rich waves over her shoulders, a jewelled crown resting on its golden splendour; she was the living illustration of the Princess described in the book.

Dick went up to her and whispered,

“ What do you think? I have just discovered that the author is here.”

“ Here? ” murmured Sylvia. “ Oh, no, not here really? ”

“ Yes, he is in his sister’s box. I have just spoken to him.”

Dick was called then to attend to something on the stage. There were two or three moments before the curtain was to rise. Sylvia ran back to her dressing-room, her maid was not there, so she was alone.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“Oh,” she cried, “at last—at last—and to-night! How glorious! For I know I am beautiful to-night; this part and these robes would make any one so. Ah, I will play my part—*how* I will play it! I will move *him*, as well as all the others. He did not care when he knew me before, but he shall care now. He must have loved the Princess in his book, and I am that Princess to-night. But I will not look at him once, I will not see him, until he asks to be brought afterwards to be introduced to me. He will ask to be—I know it.”

Dick came to the door.

“The curtain must be drawn now,” he said.

“I am ready,” said Sylvia, with a strange, glad light in her eyes, which he did not notice, as he was hurrying back towards the stage. When the curtain was drawn, it disclosed a magnificent hall in the palace of the Pharaoh. Eric looked at it, well pleased, for the scenic artist had carried out his description of the place perfectly. There was some low, soft

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

music which seemed to come from a distant room in the palace, and then the Princess entered.

Eric sat for a second as if turned to marble—then he leaned away forward, his elbow on the railing of the box.

“My God, it is Barbara!” he said in a low voice.

“What did you say, Eric?” asked his sister, but she saw that he had not heard her, and she did not repeat the question.

As soon as the curtain fell, Eric sprang to his feet. At the door he remembered his sister, and hesitated a second.

“Excuse me for a few moments,” he said, “I am sure Dick will be here, he told us he would come back again after the act.”

Then he disappeared, leaving his sister to wonder what had happened to him.

When Eric found himself out in the free night air, he threw back his head and laughed aloud.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“Thank Heaven, thank Heaven,” he whispered, as he hurried down the street, scarcely noticing where he was going, yet he had a definite object in his mind.

Fortunately the place for which he was looking was not far, in fact there were many such places in Nice—it was a florist’s.

“Give me all the violets you have,” he told the man as he entered. The florist looked at him in open-eyed amazement, it was rather an unusual hour—nine-thirty—to have a gentleman rushing in, and such a good-looking one, to demand “all of his violets,” and in such haste that he had evidently forgotten his hat. But the florist was equal to the occasion. He brought out hundreds of the fragrant little purple blossoms and tied them all together into one huge bouquet. Eric took them quickly.

“Thank you,” he said, thrusting something into the florist’s hand which made that worthy man smile broadly and bow very low.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

“He must be a prince,” said the florist to himself, looking out of the window at the retreating figure of Eric, “to be able to pay this for even such a grand bunch as I gave him. I hope he will patronise me often. I always knew it would be to my great advantage to have my shop near the theatre, and to keep plenty of flowers always ready, no matter what the time of night.”

Eric was back at the theatre. The auditorium was dark, as the third act had already begun, but he captured an usher and told him to deliver the flowers with his card to the lady who took the part of the Princess. Then he returned to his sister's box and watched the rest of the act. When it was finished, Dick came again.

“We wondered where you had gone,” he said. “Your sister and I could not imagine. But now I see. The violets have just been delivered to her. When the play is over, I want you to come and meet her.”

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“Thank you,” said Eric, with a queer little smile.

“How many more acts are there?” asked Miss Fielding. “We came in so late, we forgot to get any programmes.”

“Oh, I beg your pardon,” said Eric, won’t you have one now?”

“There is one more act,” said Dick.

“Well, never mind about the programme then,” said Miss Fielding, “Since Mr. Ames has told us what we chiefly wanted to know.”

When the play was successfully over, and Sylvia had surpassed the expectations of even her warmest admirers, she had played as if she were inspired, and it was no exaggeration to say that a professional might have been satisfied to play the rôle as well as she did.

Sylvia was intensely excited; all during the evening she had been conscious of the one face in the box—though she had never once glanced toward it—so conscious that when Dick came up to her, as she was turning toward her dress-

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of'

ing-room, to ask her if she would receive Mr. Fielding, it seemed to her as if he must see, even in the semi-darkness of the stage, the vivid blush that she felt rush to her cheeks with the sound of that name.

“ Please wait just a moment,” Dick had said. “ I want to bring Mr. Fielding to meet you. I would not let others come, for I said you would be in a hurry, and that they could see you at the ball, but if you do not mind, I would like to bring the author for a moment. I have a fancy for having the author and the heroine of his book—for truly, Sylvia, you might be the embodied Princess—meet here on the scene of your joint triumph—for I want you two to be friends.”

“ I will wait here,” said Sylvia, simply. It seemed to her that she could not trust her voice to say more than that.

After Dick was fairly out of sight, Sylvia leaned against one of the flies; she was trembling so that she felt as if she could hardly

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

stand. Now that the moment had actually come of which she had so often dreamed, it seemed to her that she had lost all her self-control, and she was seized with a great fear lest in some way she should betray her own remembrance of the far-off California days. She was positive that the lapse of years had entirely wiped all remembrance of Barbara from his mind, or if some passing thought had been awakened by her resemblance, it would have been instantly dissipated by his finding the name of Countess Sylvia on the programme.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Dick's return, closely followed by Eric.

Dick was about to speak, when Eric sprang forward and impulsively caught Sylvia's hand and raised it to his lips.

"Darling!" he whispered.

For a moment Sylvia stood dazed, she could scarcely breathe, so utterly unexpected was the word and the act, but she quickly controlled herself, and forcing a smile to her quivering

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

lips, said, "Of course, I know that you are the author, and you compliment me very much in seeing in me your Princess—but now the play is over—really—really——"

Dick stepped up; for a moment he had been too astonished to speak, and he was also amused. He supposed Sylvia's wonderful acting had made Eric forget the realities of life in believing that his Princess stood before him.

"Yes, really, Eric," Dick finally said, looking at him and laughing a little, "The Countess understands, but you know it was only a part she took—you must come back to earth. Won't you let me introduce you?"

"The Countess?" said Eric. "Countess! I do not understand."

"No, we knew you were in a dream, Eric," went on Dick, "that is why we were not more—astonished. But the truth is, this is not your Princess, it is the Countess Sylvia to whom I want to present you."

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

Eric's eyes turned from Sylvia to Dick with an agonised look.

"Countess Sylvia," he said, "what a horrible mistake I have made! Oh, can you ever forgive me?"

Sylvia looked at him kindly and smiled a little.

"Yes," she said, "I will forgive you. And I want to thank you so much for the violets,—they are lovely."

"You are very good, Countess," replied Eric coldly.

Sylvia noticed the coldness in his tone, and it sent a shiver through her.

"And now you must excuse me, gentlemen," she said, "for I must go to change my gown for the ball. I shall hope to see you there later."

She smiled at them, and turning quickly, went to her dressing-room.

Eric stood very still, looking blankly down at the floor. Dick went up to him and took his arm.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

“Come,” he said, “it is all right; she will forgive you. I don’t blame you for losing your head; she is the image of your heroine, is she not?”

“Yes,” said Eric, slowly, “she is the perfect image. It does not seem possible that she is real.”

“But wait till you see her again, later, you will find that you have not been dreaming—she is real.”

“But I have been dreaming,” said Eric. “The last hour has been a mad, terrible, beautiful dream—but now—now I am awake again!” He straightened his shoulders.

“Dick,” he said, “try to forget it all—the dreadful blunder I have made, will you not? What must you think of me? What must she think of me? Ah, I am so thankful no one else was here.”

“Don’t worry,” said Dick. “The Countess has a heart of gold; she understands that it was the influence of the play, and what woman

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

would not be flattered by such a tribute to her acting? And as for myself, why you know, my dear fellow, I am the last person in the world to remember."

They had reached the stage entrance, and stood there a moment, as the crowd was streaming past, blocking the pavement.

"You will come with me to the ball, will you not?" asked Dick.

"No, thank you just the same," said Eric, "I think I shall return home with my sister. By Jove, I had nearly forgotten her. She must be waiting for me in the box. I told her I would come back for her."

"I am sorry you won't come," said Dick, "but I must leave you then, and go alone."

Eric turned and re-entered the theatre, making his way to his sister, who sat waiting patiently for him.

CHAPTER XXI

WHEN Sylvia had changed her Egyptian robes for the ball gown which her maid had brought to the theatre, she went out to the stage entrance where her own coupé stood waiting for her, in which sat the Baroness.

“Philip came over just after you left the theatre,” said the Baroness. “He said you told him you would meet him at the ball, so I said he need not wait for me, as I would call for you myself. Was the play a success? I thought I would not come down to see it after all, as I saw it before, and I wanted to rest before the ball.”

“I believe it was a success,” said Sylvia, dreamily. “Dick told me between the acts that they were warm in their praises, and they were kind in giving us a great deal of applause.”

“I am sure they were enthusiastic. You

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

will probably hear a great deal when you reach the ball. You deserve their admiration, my dear. When I saw you, you really looked ravishing, and your acting is wonderful for an amateur. I was very proud, indeed, of you."

"Thank you," said Sylvia, pressing her aunt's hand.

"Where did you get those violets? It is the most gorgeous bunch I have ever seen. Were they sent to you behind the scenes?"

"Yes," said Sylvia.

"I noticed that you left the orchids at home which Philip sent you. I supposed you did not care to wear them, so I did not bring them. Didn't you fancy them with your gown?"

"Why, yes, I believe they would go with it, my gown is white. I had not thought, but I suppose I should wear them. Let us go home for them first."

When they reached the house, Sylvia went up to her room. She buried her face in the

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

violets a moment, then held them off, looking at them.

“There!” she said, pressing them again to her lips, “your life must needs be short—but, ah, how sweet! I am not going to put you in water—for it spoils violets to put them in water, but I will lay you on the bed and let your sweetness fill my room. I ought not to take you with me, for he must not see that I care so much for you. I must take Philip’s flowers, he would feel bad if I did not. How thoughtless of me to forget them.”

When Sylvia reached the Casino where the ball was held, she found Philip standing in the doorway waiting for her. She went to the dressing-room, threw off her wrap and then joined him again and they entered the ball-room.

He saw that she carried his flowers.

“Thank you for taking mine, when you must have had so many others too,” he said.

Sylvia blushed a little to think that she had

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

come so near forgetting his flowers, but she was thankful afresh that her aunt had reminded her in time.

On their entrance to the ball-room, Sylvia was immediately surrounded by her enthusiastic friends, eager to congratulate her upon her evening's triumph. Besides having been charmed with her acting in the play, Sylvia was a favourite with every one. So many surrounded her that the dancing was stopped for the moment at the end of the hall in which she stood. Dick was near a doorway at the other end; he looked across at the group of people, seeing Sylvia among them.

"She is always the centre of everything wherever she goes—the little Countess—the desire of every heart," he said to himself. "Ah, lucky man who is strong enough to withstand her captivating graces. Mr. Richard Ames, I bow to your Herculean strength of character, you are a rare specimen!" He smiled as he paid himself this compliment—

SYLVIA: *The* STORY *of*

yet who shall say why the smile was followed by a sigh?

“I won't bother her by trying to get a dance yet, I will let the others have my share to-night. They seem wilder than ever, after her triumph in the play. Look at Philip, poor chap, he is already devoured with jealousy at those men who are claiming dances. Dick went to the smoking-room to enjoy a cigar and chat with the few men already there, who thought as he did, that they would keep in the background, at least for the present.

Philip presently succeeded in securing his partner for the first dance. She allowed him to put his name down for several more on her card, as he had brought her, but she had to give a great many to the others. When they had finished the waltz and were taking a short stroll in the conservatory, waiting for the next dance, she glanced down at her card, realising that all the dances were taken. She felt a bitter disappointment that this should be so.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“None left for Dick,” she said to herself, “and none for—for—if he should want one. This ball is a failure. I wish it were time to go home, but alas, it is only just beginning.”

With a start she realised that Philip was speaking to her, and she had no idea what he was saying.

Though she should not have a dance to give him, she believed that Eric would at least come up and ask for one, and she could talk to him for the moment. But the evening wore on, and after each dance she looked for him in vain.

“He must be here,” she said to herself, impatiently, “but why does he not find me? It is simple enough—the others manage it. And I wonder where Dick is, I have not seen him either.”

The man she was with was looking at her.

“May I get you a glass of water, or something? You look pale,” he said.

She sighed wearily.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

“ Perhaps I am a little tired,” she said. “ I have been dancing so much, the intermissions are so short. Thank you, I think I would like a glass of water. I will sit here and wait for you.”

He left her in a corner near the entrance to the hallway which led to the smoking-room. Just then Dick appeared at this entrance, and, seeing her, hurried towards her.

“ This is very fortunate,” he said, dropping into a chair beside her.

“ I have been keeping out of the way, because I felt the others deserved you. I am usually so selfish in asking for so many dances, I thought I would be good to-night. Pray, Mademoiselle, admire my noble disinterestedness. But may I have a dance now? ”

“ I am afraid there are none left,” said Sylvia.

“ I am so sorry! ” exclaimed Dick. “ But I may wait here until your partner returns, may I not? ”

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“Yes, gladly,” she said. She was longing to ask him where Eric was, but she felt she could not word even that simple question without betraying her own great interest in the man who was supposed to be a stranger to her. Then Dick spoke again, and her heart beat quicker as she heard what he was saying.

“I could not persuade Mr. Fielding to come with me. I fear he was very much embarrassed at his mistake to-night, and did not dare meet you again—at least so soon.”

Sylvia gave a little laugh, she felt happy, for, even though she was not to see him that night, he had not been there and neglected to come to her.

“He need not be afraid of me.”

“No, so I said,” replied Dick. “I told him you were generous and had a forgiving heart, but he insisted upon returning home.”

Just then Sylvia’s partner came back with the glass of water, and Dick left her.

When Sylvia and her aunt reached home

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

after the ball, the Baroness said, as she bade her good-night,

“You must stay in bed and rest to-morrow, or rather this morning, for you need it, as we leave this afternoon.”

“Leave this afternoon?” said Sylvia. “Oh,—I had forgotten.”

“Forgotten? That we were to leave for Switzerland for the summer?”

“Yes, I had quite forgotten. Oh, how I wish we need not go now—now——”

Her aunt looked at her in amazement.

“What has come over you, Sylvia? You have been even more eager for this journey than I have. You know you never stay in Nice in the summer months—you can’t really mean that you don’t wish to go?”

“Why, of course, auntie, I wish to go. What could I have been dreaming of? I did not realise what I was saying. Certainly we will go; we could not remain here, it would be impossible.”

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“I thought you must have been in the clouds, dear, the evening has been so full of excitement for you. Now go to bed and have a good long rest. You need it, and if you are too fatigued to start this afternoon, we will postpone it until to-morrow.”

“Oh, I shall be ready,” said Sylvia, “but I hope you will not be too tired yourself, auntie.” She said good-night and went to her own room. She closed the door and heaved a contented sigh, she was glad to be alone. The lights had been turned on by her maid, and the room prepared for her for the night. She looked towards the bed—the violets were gone!

Sylvia summoned her maid.

“Where are the violets I left here?”

“I did not put them in water, Mademoiselle,” replied the girl, “for you have often told me that that spoils violets, but I took them down to the refrigerator—they will keep nicely there, I think.”

“You may bring them to me.” said Sylvia.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

The girl returned with the violets and helped her mistress prepare for bed. When Sylvia was ready and the maid had gone, she placed the violets beside her on the pillow, with one hand thrown over them. A bewitching, happy little smile crept about her mouth, she closed her eyes and almost immediately fell into a deep sleep—she was very tired.

CHAPTER XXII

THE Fieldings spent the summer in England, but returned to Nice in the autumn. They had been back but a day when Dick came to see Eric.

“I have asked the Countess if I may take you to call,” he said. “And do you want to go to-morrow night? If we go, they will send you a card to their ball next week, it is to be the first really large affair to open the season.”

“Thank you,” said Eric, “but I do not know that I care to go.”

“Do not care to go? Great Heavens, man, are you out of your senses—and you intend to spend the winter in Nice!”

“Must I know the Countess to spend the winter here?” asked Eric, laughing.

“Certainly, she is the acknowledged leader in society. If you do not care to join her court of admirers, you at least must attend her en-

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

tertainments. You would be hopelessly out of everything if you did not. And this from *you*, the Lion of the hour! Look here, old man, brace up, you know you like society, do not pretend to be *blasé*."

"I am not in the least *blasé*," said Eric, only if you remember my meeting with the Countess—when I made such a fool of myself—you cannot blame me if I hesitate about seeing her again. However, if I must do it, I suppose I must."

"Don't worry, she has probably forgotten all about it. She will be pleased to have you come, for she told me I might bring you."

"Then I will go," said Eric.

The next evening found Dick and Eric at Sylvia's villa. There were several others already there, so the two men made but a formal call, and then took their departure.

"Now that you have seen her as she is," said Dick, as they were walking toward the gateway, "and not as the Egyptian, don't you

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

think she is even more beautiful than she was in the play?"

"She certainly is very pretty," said Eric, without enthusiasm.

Dick was saying to himself:

"I can see that this is going to be a relief from Philip—they are to be the two extremes."

He made another remark to Eric about the Countess—to test his theory—and as Eric did not respond, Dick patted himself on the back, figuratively speaking, to think that he had at last found a man who would not go into raptures at the mere mention of her name. Eric saw her very often. There was some social event nearly every night as the season was a gay one. He talked to her and stood near her, when he was obliged to, but the rest of the time he kept away. It tortured him to look at her. He remembered the night in California when he had first met Barbara, and had compared her to the girl he had seen in Venice. Why had Fate brought him back to this girl, who in

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

every detail of appearance, was so like Barbara? And her voice—that wonderful, low sweet voice that he had so loved in Barbara—he heard again when with the Countess. Her eyes looked up at one in the same innocent way—her laugh was the same—that merry laugh that had so rejoiced him, and that had rung through his memory all these years. It nearly drove him mad to hear it now from this other girl. What right had she to be so much like Barbara? If he shut his eyes, he could almost think that it was Barbara, and when he opened them again, the bitterness of the reality seemed almost more than he could bear.

And yet each time that he saw her, he told himself that if he knew her—her character and thoughts and ideas—he would find her entirely different from Barbara. He longed with all his strength to prove this so for he resented bitterly the fact that she should look so much like his lost love. Yet he persisted in his determination to find it only a physical resemblance.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

The soul—the mind—the heart of Barbara could have—should have no counterpart.

“It cannot be, it is impossible!” he said savagely once upon leaving her after a dance. “I will not go near her again for a week! I have grown fanciful about her. I know it is all in my fancy, it is not true that she is really like Barbara. I will stay away until I have grown rational again.”

But he suddenly remembered that he must see her the very next day, as he had gotten up a coaching party and had invited her to take the box seat beside him.

“It seems to be Fate that I should be with her, and as this is so, I will baffle Fate itself, I will be with her every day if circumstances throw us together, and instead of being afraid to find her like Barbara, I will know it is impossible, I will prove this in spite of Fate.”

His whole energy was thrown into this one longing—to prove her entirely different in character, no matter how like in face and form.

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

He felt he must do it for Barbara's sake as well as his own.

The next day, when the party had returned from the drive and had left Sylvia standing on the piazza, she watched the coach drive away, waving her hand to her friends as they passed through the gateway. She sank into a chair with a little happy laugh.

"It is almost too good to be true," she whispered. "How dear he is when one knows him better! All that I had thought of him, all that I had imagined about him is not so good as he himself is!"

She was filled with unspeakable gladness, for she saw him so often, she felt sure that he must at least like her, and she was contented with this; she was enjoying the present, neither hoping nor wondering if he would some day love her as she loved him. She thought that he must at least care something for her, or why did he so evidently seek her out? And yet—and yet—if he did care, why did he not

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

say so, as other men did? She had been able to know him just so well and never any better; they went just so far in their friendship and never any further. She knew that she was not the one to decide how far their friendship should go, Eric, was the one. They had talked of books, people, art and many things, but there it had stopped, nothing any more personal, and if he would not, she could not.

And though she had been so happy in the friendship she had already, all at once, that afternoon as she sat on the verandah, after having been by his side all through the day, she suddenly felt a great longing spring up in her heart for more—ininitely more. Their friendship had been sweet, but she loved him. Love cannot be satisfied for long with mere friendship, and she was beginning to realise this.

The thought of Philip came to her, and she wondered the old, old problem, why does not love always beget love, why does the human

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

heart so often find its greatest desire in the unattainable? For the men who offered her their love she felt little concern, for she believed that none of them would suffer long or deep. She did not attempt to analyse the qualities of their proffered love, but attributed it to her wealth and title. She knew of course that she was beautiful, but she held beauty a gift from God, something to be glad and thankful for, but no cause for pride or vanity. But her greatest charm, that which rendered her irresistible to men and women alike, was a charm of which she was herself unconscious, that subtle, indescribable gift, without which beauty itself wearies or wit palls—the charm of magnetism.

But with Philip she knew it was different from the other men. Though she had really never given him any ground for hope, they had been on terms of unusually close friendship ever since that evening in Venice when he had first told her that he loved her. She knew that time had made no difference in his thought

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

of her, that his love for her was to-day as it had been then, true and deep, and she believed what he had so often told her, that it filled his whole life. And now all her heart went out in longing that Eric should feel just such a love as this.

CHAPTER XXIII

SPRING came, and in such a Fairy-land as it brought it was impossible not to feel happy—at least so Sylvia thought, as she opened her window one morning and looked out upon the exquisite world of flowers. The Carnival had just passed and she had had such merry times. Eric had been constantly near her through it all. She had been joyous, even if underneath her happiness she had felt that ceaseless longing. She looked out across the garden and sang a gay little song, and drew toward her a rose which had climbed to her window. Her soul had seemed a moment ago too full of joy for utterance, and yet—and yet—her song ceased suddenly, and a tear fell on the rose which she had pressed against her face.

“I feel,” she said, “as if it were not real, my joy, the gladness I have felt in being with him so much, is not real, for it can only last while I am with him; when I am away from

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

him, it is gone. I do not understand—he likes me I am sure, but does he care? Ah, I almost fear he does not, for if he did, surely he would tell me so.”

Eric had asked her to ride with him that afternoon.

This would be only one of many rides which they had taken together, in which they had explored the beautiful country about Nice.

As they started off, Eric exclaimed, with a gaiety unusual to him, “Whither shall we go, fair lady? We seem to have been over all the roads about here and, like Nineteenth Century Alexanders, we sigh for more worlds to conquer!”

“Let’s leave the beaten paths, and go across country,” said Sylvia.

After winding in and out among the woods they came to a broad open tract of open country.

“The very place for a race! I defy you to catch me!” cried Sylvia, starting ahead.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

A word to his horse, and Eric was in close pursuit. His was the better mount, and he could have easily overtaken her, but he found pleasure in her innocent wish to win, and his own reward for any sacrifice he made as sportsman he found in watching the graceful, girlish figure riding so fearlessly before him.

Suddenly Sylvia's horse caught one of his fore feet in a nasty hole, which was hidden by the tall grass growing over it. The animal fell forward, throwing Sylvia over its head. Though she landed on the soft turf, the fall was such a sudden one that it stunned her and she lay quite unconscious. Eric was off his horse and at her side in a second. He quickly put his coat under her head and ran to a brook which he discovered near by, bringing some water in his hat. Sylvia soon opened her eyes and smiled up at him.

"It is really nothing," she said, "How foolish of me to have fainted."

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“But you are hurt!” he said with deep anxiety.

“Oh, really, I am not hurt, only stunned a little, a bit dizzy, but it is nothing—let us go on.” She glanced about them for the horses. Her own lay where he had fallen, his leg broken.

There was no sign of the other. In Eric’s anxiety over Sylvia, he had completely forgotten him; the horse, being free, had taken the opportunity to trot contentedly home. Sylvia uttered an exclamation of dismay.

“Oh, my poor Kelpa!” the tears, which her own mishap had not brought, coming quickly at the sight of her favourite’s unhappy fate.

“Is his leg broken, must he be killed?”

“I fear so, but I will make sure,” said Eric, going over to the horse. It required only a hasty examination to see that the bone was indeed broken and that there was no help for the faithful brute.

“It is too bad,” said Eric. “Believe me, you

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

have my whole sympathy. I love my own horses too well not to know what a grief this is to you. But I can only think of your narrow escape and feel thankful that you are unharmed. My chief concern now is to get you home, for it is growing late and I fear that you may find you are more shaken than you think. It is too far for me to leave you to go to try to seek aid. I fear there is nothing for us to do but to go on until we meet some one. Are you sure you are equal to it?"

"Oh, yes indeed," said Sylvia.

She found when she was on her feet that she was rather faint and dizzy, and but for the support of Eric's arm would hardly have been able to stand; but at the sight of his evident anxiety she started on. They walked slowly, stopping often for Sylvia to rest, a precaution she found quite necessary, as she discovered on moving that she was more bruised than she had supposed. Their progress was necessarily slow, and as they had ridden farther than they

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

had realised, it was a long, painful journey back—painful for Sylvia, in spite of her happiness in a realisation of a new quality of tenderness in Eric's anxious care of her. Painful for Eric too—in a different way—for he realised with a great shock what this beautiful girl, leaning trustfully on his arm, had become to him.

At last his eyes were opened and he realised the whole unwelcome truth—unwelcome to his ideas of constancy—he was untrue to his own high ideals—it was not the dead Barbara, but the living Sylvia that he loved!

CHAPTER XXIV

To understand Eric's poignant suffering over the discovery that his love for his lost sweetheart was merged into a deeper passion for the Countess Sylvia, one must understand his early training better. The idol of Eric's boyhood had been his beautiful mother. The tie between them was exceptionally close, and young as he was when she had died, he had never forgotten her or her teachings. She had been a sensitively organised, highly spiritual woman, qualities she had transmitted in an unusual degree to her son, and during their years together, she had taught him not only her strong religious faith, but many of her individual beliefs. One of the strongest of these was her conviction that true love could be felt but once by any human heart, and that in its very nature and essence it was deathless and immortal. To the mother and therefore to the son, it would have seemed impossible

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

that one could love a second time. It had been a cardinal article of her faith which she had impressed upon him from infancy that love was divine and eternal, and that death therefore was a temporary parting only, which could neither lessen love, nor break the bonds which united lovers. So firmly did Eric believe this, that even as he had stood by the mound which the old man had pointed out to him as Barbara's grave, after the first awful shock, his soul had turned to the faith of his childhood. He had felt that the remainder of his existence in this world must be but a mere leaf in the Book of Life, and that as soon as Death should release him, he could hasten to find Barbara again.

Therefore, as this belief had meant everything to him for the last three years, and as he had believed himself to belong to Barbara wholly and entirely, the sudden realisation of his love for another woman—even though he felt that his love for her had sprung up from

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

the fact of her great resemblance to Barbara—was a realisation that shook the foundations of his every idea and religious belief, and left him filled with unutterable horror at his own unfaithfulness to what had seemed the true and only love of his life.

That night, when Eric reached his own room, he threw himself into a chair, and crossing his arms on a table next which he sat, he buried his head in them. He remained motionless for a long time. Finally his frame was shaken by sobs—the slow-coming, agonising sobs of a strong man suffering. Never before had he been thus moved. Though after Barbara's death, he had been so overcome with sorrow that it had seemed to him he could not live, even then he had not so broken down.

“Barbara,” he cried, “look down and save me! Why don't you come back and restore my reason? I believe it is going. Where are you Barbara? Why don't you come?”

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

He looked up, but he could see nothing—there was nothing but the darkness. The lamp, as he sat there, had burned low, had flickered and gone out.

“She has deserted me,” he moaned, “I am left in utter blackness. O God, forgive me, for I need Thy mercy!”

Then he sprang up and turned on an electric light. The sudden brightness seemed to send a glow of relief through his frame. He went over to the window and threw it open. The night outside looked very peaceful and still, the stars were twinkling softly, the moon was shedding its bright light on all below. Eric stood looking dully up at the Heavens, his mind filled with agonising thoughts.

“Sweet Barbara, send down your forgiveness, he whispered appealingly. “I implore you, though I do not deserve it, I know—for I have been a traitor! For four years have I loved you, worshipped you with my whole strength, and I could have sworn upon my soul

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

that I would so have loved you throughout eternity, and yet—oh Heaven, must I confess it? To-day, in one short hour I find I love another. It is true, it is true!”

He still looked up, as if dimly hoping to find response to his confession, but only the stars were there, and the moon, moving swiftly through the cloudless sky.

“You will not look at me, nor answer me, sweet Barbara? Oh, Heaven help me, what am I to do?”

Suddenly he stepped away from the window and drew himself up very erect. He closed his lips firmly, squared his shoulders and tossed back his head, a way he had of doing when he was very much in earnest and had just made a new determination.

“I must either tell Sylvia that I love her, and so be a traitor to Barbara in deed as well as in thought, or I must go away. I have given myself to Barbara, I belong to her, I will be true to that pledge, and I will go away.”

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

The next day he told his sister that he was going back to Egypt.

She looked at him in dismay.

“Not for long?” she asked.

“I do not know—perhaps—it is indefinite. I have a good deal of work to do, which is best done there.”

“That is a bitter disappointment. I had told myself that you were at home now to stay. What shall I do without you?”

“Won’t you come too? We can stay in Cairo and be very comfortable there.”

“I will consider it,” she replied. “But you won’t go until the autumn, will you? I had promised Lady Raleigh we would visit her, and she wants us to come soon. Won’t you go to England with me first?”

Eric had decided to go to Egypt at once, but if it was going to please his sister, he would change his plans.

“Yes, I will go,” he said. “When do you want to set out?”

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

"In a few days," she answered.

That afternoon he went over to see Sylvia and made a very short call. He went to inquire how she was, after the accident of the day before. He saw only the Baroness, as Sylvia still felt rather shaken up. When he returned home, his sister told him that she would be ready to leave in two days. The next afternoon Eric decided ^{that} ~~he~~ must at least see Sylvia for a formal good-bye, but again he met only the Baroness. She told him ~~that~~ Sylvia was entirely recovered, but that she had persuaded her to remain in her room for a few more days of rest.

"Will you please say to her how glad I am that she has felt no serious effects from her accident, and that I called to see how she was and say good-bye."

"Good-bye? You are going early this year. We do not leave for several weeks. But you will return in the autumn, of course, will you not?"

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“No, I expect to go directly to Egypt from England.”

“Egypt? Oh, then we are to have more charming Egyptian stories! We shall be sorry indeed to lose you, Mr. Fielding, but glad to be at least partly recompensed for our loss by more tales from the banks of the Nile. If you will wait a few moments, I will tell Sylvia, for I know she would want to say good-bye to you herself.”

“I should be very glad,” replied Eric, “if she is able to come down, but if she is too tired——”

“Oh, she is really quite well, it is only that she needed a little rest. Excuse me, and I will call her.”

When the Baroness had gone, Eric went over to one of the windows and looked out at the garden. The place seemed strangely quiet, the air was soft and warm, the flowers and trees seemed to Eric more beautiful, more like an enchanted Fairy-land than ever, and in

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

a few short hours he was to turn his back on it all forever—never to come here again—never to wait here in this room for its fair mistress! He closed his eyes, he did not know how long he stood there, it might have been for several moments, and it might have been for merely a second, when he heard a low, soft voice very near him.

“I am so very sorry to hear that you are going away—and for so long.”

He turned quickly. Sylvia stood there, a slender, delicate little figure, looking up at him with big, wistful eyes, that said more to him than her words, but he did not read them, for his own thoughts were filling him with despair. As he looked at her, a great, almost overpowering longing came to him to pick her up in his arms, and tell her that she was his, his, *his*—whether she would or not! She was so dainty and fragile, it would have been mere child's play to his great strength.) But he stood very still until he could control his desire.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“Thank you,” he said. “I am very sorry too, and it is very good of you to come down when I know you are not yet yourself again. Are you really feeling nearly well?”

“Oh, yes,” said Sylvia, turning and sinking into the nearest chair. “I have quite recovered, but auntie insisted that I play the invalid a little longer. I was sorry to miss you yesterday. But are you not going away rather earlier than usual? And auntie says that you are going to Egypt afterwards?”

“Yes,” answered Eric.

He was still standing. He knew that he could not remain with her longer, he could not trust himself; if he were to stay, even for only a few moments, he knew that he would tell her how he loved her, he knew that he would ask her if it were possible for her ever to care for him. He was afraid, and so he said hastily,

“I fear this is good-bye for a long time. I want to thank you for all the kindness you have shown me. I am so glad your mishap the

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

other day was not serious—thank you again for your goodness—good-bye.”

He held out his hand. He had not the least idea what he had been saying except that he had been able to hide the feeling that was struggling to express itself. He knew that these few formal words sounded cold, but better than to betray a trace of the fire within.

She laid her hand in his for a second, it was icy cold, but he was too excited to notice it. She drew it quickly away again for fear he might discover that she was trembling.

“Good-bye,” he said in a low voice. He turned quickly and left her. They had been in the library. How different all the familiar objects looked now—how cold and deserted. Not far from her on the floor stood a tall vase filled with roses. Unconsciously Sylvia moved nearer these, the roses seemed to be the only bit of colour in the room. She put her slender fingers about one and looked down at it caressingly.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“It is all over,” she said in a low voice, a voice which seemed filled with sobs, “all over. Even the joy I felt before—is gone. I have not even that now, it is entirely ended. I wish I were like one of these roses—to live and bloom but for a day—then let everything fade away. How contented one could be to lie down and fall into an endless, dreamless sleep—forgetting all things, and being in turn forgotten.”

CHAPTER XXV

MISS FIELDING had promised her friend Lady Raleigh to visit her for several weeks, but Eric intended to stay at Raleigh Court a few days only, as he knew its host, Lord Richard Raleigh, very slightly, and although he was glad to please his sister, he was restless to get away from all those he knew. Although Lady Raleigh was a widow, she still cared a great deal for society and liked to fill the house full of her own friends and those of her children, Richard and Lillian. Lady Raleigh had visited America several times with her daughter, and one was always sure to find a large representation from the United States at her house parties.

Eric and his sister had arrived late one afternoon, and upon entering the drawing-room, Lord Raleigh presented Eric to the others already there. He first met a pretty little widow, Lady Beatrice Maxwell, and next to

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

her he saw Edith Laurence. Edith looked up at him and smiled. She had heard of his coming, and had prepared the manner in which she would treat him. She intended to be pleasant, but most indifferent, for she had long ago found how impossible it was to stir him to a single spark of feeling. And then too, she had heard a great deal about his attentions to a certain Countess in Nice, from Lady Beatrice, who seemed to be posted on all social affairs, even as far off as the Riviera.

That night, after every one had retired, Edith slipped across to Lady Beatrice's room which was just opposite her own. They sat before a fire in the grate, as so many women love to do, when the hour is very late.

The last conversation they had had together had been about Eric, and now they resumed it.

"And have you ever seen this Countess to whom he has been so attentive all winter?" asked Edith.

"Yes, I have seen her several times. She

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

really is unusually lovely, and she certainly is fascinating—'La Bella Comtessa'—as she is called all through Italy. I call her 'The Siren of the Mediterranean'—the men go to Nice—meet her—and the rest of us are forgotten."

"I think you must be exaggerating it," said Edith.

"No, I find that this is true from experience. Listen, and I will tell you something. Before I married Lord Maxwell, I was very much—very fond of Lord Raleigh. I believe he liked me also. But he went to the Continent, he went to Nice—and there he stayed. Before long, I heard rumours of this Countess with whom he had fallen desperately in love. You can imagine my feeling! Well, to show him that I did not care, I married Lord Maxwell. That was four years ago. Poor, dear Maxwell, he did not know what a fraud I was—that I had married him merely from pique. But I will do myself the justice to say that I was a good wife. Then, as you know,

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

Lord Maxwell died. When I saw Lord Raleigh again, I heard that it was all over with the Countess, she had evidently refused him, and he had come back home to try to forget. This was a pleasant thought to me—to feel that he did not marry her merely because she would not have him! So I treated him very coldly and indifferently. I flirted awfully with the other men, so he never dreamed that I even remembered our former little affair. This stirred him up a bit, and now—well—now I have him again where I want him. My dear, if you want a man to fall in love with you, show him that there are many others far more attractive than he is—*never* let him think that he is anything to you.”

Edith felt a flush mounting to her cheek, she was thinking that this good piece of advice had come to her rather late. She rose—kissed Lady Beatrice, thanking her for her confidence, and said good night. When she was in her own room again, she stood for some

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

time before the dressing-table looking at a photograph which stood there. It was one Eric had given her when they had been engaged, and she had kept it and taken it everywhere with her.

“And so you are in love with a beautiful Italian? And I?—I am the same old fool. Ah, well, so the world goes. But my curiosity is aroused, I will some day have a look at this Countess who wins all hearts. I wonder if it is a possible thing that she cannot care for Eric in return?” A wicked little smile crept into Edith’s face. “I hope so, it would do Eric such a world of good to be refused—and I—I should be revenged!”

But Edith knew that all Lady Beatrice had told her might not be the exact facts in the case. She intended to find out the truth for herself. She had not seen Eric for three years, not since that night in Newport when she had sent him away, but she had heard many things of him since that time—his going to Egypt for so long

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

—she remembered the girl he had said that he loved, and she supposed then that this girl must have died; but a sudden thought came to her, perhaps, instead, it was this same Countess? Why not? He might have met her in Europe and have gone to see her before he went to Egypt. If he really was in love with this Countess now, it must be the same one, for Edith knew Eric was not the kind of man to love twice. While she tried to puzzle all this out, she became more and more convinced that she was correct, and that there had been only one girl all the time—this Countess. She also remembered—Edith had an unusually good memory—a certain evening after his return from Italy, when she had discovered him so intent on thoughts of Venice and a girl he had seen there.

“The very same girl!” she exclaimed. “I am sure of it. Though he said he had seen her but twice, it was a case of love at first sight. Heavens, what a wonder that girl must be to

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

have captivated a man like Eric so suddenly and held him so strongly that a whole year later he was as much in love as ever!"

The next day Edith learned more, she found that Eric was going to Egypt directly from England, for an indefinite period.

"He has been refused again," she thought, "I can read it in his face as easily as in a book, and the fact of his going back to bury himself in Egypt again proves it. But I must meet this Countess; such a woman interests me."

During the few days longer that Eric remained at Raleigh Court, Edith saw little or nothing of him, and heard no more of the fair unknown, but her determination to see the woman she believed to be her successful rival grew stronger with the thought of her. Edith had come to Europe with some friends for an indefinite time. She knew that Nice was deserted in summer. She waited in England until September came, then she asked her

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

friends if they did not want to spend a few weeks in Nice. They took rooms at one of the hotels on the Promenade des Anglais, and as they found many Americans there whom they knew, Edith's friends agreed with her that it would be pleasant to remain there some time.

On the afternoon of the second day of her arrival, Edith first saw Sylvia. Dick Ames Philip Monroe and others whom she had known in New York, had come to call at once upon hearing that she was there. And this afternoon Dick had asked her to drive with him. They were passing the public gardens, and at that particular spot there were so many carriages that they were obliged to move slowly. Edith was looking about at the brilliant assemblage, when she suddenly gave a little exclamation.

“What a beauty!” she said involuntarily.

She had caught sight of a girl who sat beside Philip Monroe in a high cart passing very

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

near their own. Dick looked in the same direction. He smiled.

“Who is she?” asked Edith, but before her question was answered, she knew that it must be the Countess.

“She is the Countess Sylvia.”

“Ah!”

Dick looked at her, a little amused.

“You have heard of her?” he asked.

“Yes, I have heard of her beauty, and I admit that I was anxious to see her. Now that I have, I do not wonder that her beauty has become famous.”

That evening Dick was calling on Sylvia.

“A New York girl, a friend of mine, of Eric’s, Philip’s, and all of us, is here now,” he said. “It would be so good of you if you would call on her. She is of course a stranger and knows no one here except the few New Yorkers.”

“I shall be glad to call,” said Sylvia. “I will go to-morrow. You know how delighted

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

I always am to meet Americans and do what I can for them."

"You are very good," said Dick, "I am sure she will appreciate it, as she is to be here for several weeks."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE next afternoon found Sylvia at the hotel at which Edith was staying. Edith did not ask her up to her own suite of rooms, but received her in one of the hotel drawing-rooms.

Sylvia remained some time, much longer than she usually stayed for a mere formal visit. When she had gone, and Edith had returned to her own room, she threw herself on a luxurious divan which stood in one corner. She put her hand up to her throat, it was hurting her, and she became conscious that she was shivering.

“I know that I am a fool!” she said savagely, “I have admitted it many times, have I not? But never was I such a fool as now, to have come here to this place, to see *her!* Why could I not have stayed away? I would have, if I had known, if I had known what this agony would be when I saw her. I have been

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

tortured with jealousy before, but it has never been so terrible as this. Before, I only imagined what the girl he loved was like, but now I have come face to face with her! I hate her! Heavens, what a divine face she has. No wonder the men go crazy over her, no wonder Eric was won even from a glance." She sprang up, clinching her hands fiercely. "I want to hurt her!" cried Edith. "I want to crush her! She has no right to be so beautiful, she has no right to be so fascinating that a man like Eric will adore her the moment he sees her—she has no right—it is too much! She stole Eric from me when I believed he was mine, she has ruined my life. Why could she not be content with the others? Why need she take Eric? She does not care for him? No, that is proved by his going away, and she stays placidly here, smiling calmly over her triumphs. One man more or less, makes no difference to her, what does she care that Eric adores her? He is only one of all the others whom she throws over.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

But—" Edith moved quickly back and forth in the room—" she shall learn to feel, she shall learn to suffer, she too, shall have her heart wrung—and then the pain in mine will cease!"

From that time on, Edith spent many hours in trying to think of a way to gain her end. Whenever she was thrown with the Countess, which was often, as all those who had the admittance to Sylvia's house, found all other doors open likewise, each time that Edith was with her, she studied her, she watched her, and found out in every way possible what her life was, who were the people she liked and who were those she disliked. It had very soon occurred to Edith that if Sylvia cared somewhat for any man, if she could discover that man and take him away from her, in that she could wreak her revenge. Edith knew that this would be a difficult thing to do, if the unknown man was in love with the Countess, but Edith knew that she herself also had the power of charming men, and that if she put her whole

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

energy into it, she might win. Other men were not like Eric, she feared failure with no one else.

One morning Sylvia had come to ask Edith to take a drive with her. Edith had remained in bed unusually late, and was not dressed when Sylvia came. She sent word for her to come up to her own parlour, saying she would be ready in a few moments. Sylvia had never happened to come up to Edith's room before, and she looked about with interest at all the different photographs and knick-knacks which Edith always carried with her. Edith had many friends, and some celebrated ones, so that her collection of photographs was especially interesting. Sylvia grew absorbed in looking at them, scarcely realising that the moments were flying. Suddenly she caught sight of a photograph of Eric. It stood on the mantel-shelf in a gold frame. She had never happened to see his picture before; their friendship had not grown intimate enough for them to ex-

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

change photographs, and she had never before known any one who had owned one. Therefore it took her completely by surprise. She looked at it devouringly for some moments, his eyes looked back at her so naturally, that they almost seemed to speak. She forgot where she was, she forgot whose photograph it was, she forgot everything in an irresistible impulse. She picked it up quickly and pressed her lips to it passionately. "Dearest," she said.

Edith had a way of always entering a room noiselessly. She prided herself on being somewhat of a student of human nature, and she believed that a great deal could be learned in coming upon people unawares. Of course when there was a door to be opened first, it was impossible to be noiseless, but when she could enter a room, having first looked into it from an adjoining apartment, she could linger a moment silently on the threshold before entering, and thus discover people as they really were before they became conscious of her pres-

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

ence. This had been in her mind as she had left her room and crossed the room between that and the one in which she knew the Countess was waiting. She had reached the entrance at the very moment when Sylvia had first caught sight of Eric's picture, and thus she had witnessed the whole tableau. She also heard the little whispered, "Dearest" and that was enough. She turned, retreating as silently as she had come. In her own room she sank into a chair. The sudden excitement that her discovery had caused almost overpowered her.

"Marvellous!" she exclaimed, "I can scarcely believe it! She loves him—and *he does not love her!* Of course he does not, or why did he not tell her so? And he is in Egypt, for an indefinite period! Ah—Fate is at last with me. I can have my revenge!"

She went back to the room in which Sylvia was, but this time she went noisily so that Sylvia should hear her approach and have time to put the picture back. She found her

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

standing in the other part of the room, apparently very much absorbed in a photograph of a certain celebrated opera singer, although Edith's quick eye detected the effort she was making to seem calm and as if nothing had happened.

"I am very sorry to have kept you waiting so long," said Edith going over to her. "It was unpardonable of me to have been so lazy this morning."

"Oh, do not apologise," said Sylvia, "I have not minded waiting in the least, I have been looking at some of your photographs."

This was the very reply Edith had hoped that she would make.

"So good of you to take an interest in them. I really am rather proud of my collection. Let me tell you a few of their names, of course you know many of them, but I believe I must have one or two American celebrities whom you have probably never met." She named several of them, gradually moving

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

around to the other side of the room in front of Eric's picture.

"Of course this man you probably know very well," she said, taking up the picture, "as I believe he has been here in Nice. We are very proud of him—you cannot blame us? Perhaps I ought not to tell you this, you might not be interested—but sometimes I like to take a glance back into the past, when I am with a friend. I do not of course believe in boasting of one's admirers, but he has become so famous now, I can but be proud of the fact that we were once engaged." She did not look up, she wanted to give Sylvia the satisfaction of knowing that she could not have observed her sudden startled expression. Edith kept on looking down at the picture she held in her hand and continued, "I almost—I sometimes wish that I had not thrown him over. I really cannot understand how it was that I could not love him. He is certainly fascinating, I admit that, and when I accepted him of course I be-

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

lieved that I loved him—but I found it was only pity after all. It is difficult for a woman to define the difference between love and pity, is it not? When a man adores you so, when he begs for your love, it is hard to resist? Well, you see I could not resist, at least at first, I gave in—but finally, I found I should not have done so. Pity is not love—and therefore I had to tell him so. He took it bravely—I almost loved him for that—and then he went away. You may have heard of his going to Egypt. I supposed of course he had gotten all over it, and I was so glad, no true woman can be anything but glad to have it so, when she cannot give herself to the man that loves her—but this summer, ah, my dear, I saw him again in England, he told me again that it was just the same with him as ever, but, well, it was impossible. I had to send him away once more. It really——” she felt about for her handkerchief. She had managed to bring some genuine tears to her eyes, they were always so

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

effective, and then they would make the Countess believe her even more unobserving.

“But mercy, how selfish of me, and how conceited, to keep you standing here listening to an old love affair—it *is* old, for it is so entirely in the past, he will never ask me again, he knows it is useless—but forgive me for talking so long about myself! And I have not even thanked you for coming to take me to drive! Ah, you do not know how good it is in you. I shall just love to go. You see I have my hat on. I shall not need a jacket, shall I? I see that you have none.”

Sylvia was somewhat of an actress—that is, she could be, if she tried, and she had been schooling herself for the last three or four months—her whole life had become to her a mere stage on which she was to play a part—a part of laughter and gaiety, through which there must never creep the least sign of what lay underneath—and so she had quickly been

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

able to control her emotion. She looked at Edith smilingly.

“It is delightfully warm this morning. I thought we would go for a drive into the woods somewhere, and then I want to take you home with me to lunch. I have invited a few others to come also, although most informally, but there is a very celebrated musician here from Russia, a pianist, and I wanted you all to meet him, he has promised to play for us afterward.”

“How delicious!” exclaimed Edith.

Late that afternoon, when it was growing dark, Sylvia stood a moment in the drawing-room—the last of her guests had just gone. She stepped into the garden; she felt suffocated and wanted to be in the open air. Her aunt was on the verandah and was just about to call her to come back, as they must dress for a dinner party they were to attend that evening, when her words were stopped with an exclamation of horror. She saw Sylvia sud-

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

denly totter and fall. The Baroness ran quickly down to her and called a servant, and they carried her up to her room, where they worked for some time before they were able to restore her to consciousness. When Sylvia was able to speak, she insisted that she was not hurt, it had merely been a faint.

“But you must let us put you to bed,” said the Baroness. “I will send word that we cannot go to the dinner. I would not think of your trying to get up. Dear child, I am worried to death about you. You have never seemed strong since that nasty fall last spring. I am afraid it hurt you in some way, after all. I intend to send at once for that expert from Paris, to see if he can tell what it is.”

Sylvia took her aunt's hand and smiled up at her, a sad, wan little smile, that went straight to the kindly woman's heart and made a lump in her throat.

“I am sure he will find nothing the matter,” said Sylvia. “Do not worry, auntie dear,”

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

I am perfectly well, I shall be myself again some day, soon—very soon.”

When Sylvia was ready to go to sleep for the night and the Baroness had left her, having sat at her bedside for several hours, Sylvia turned her face toward the window. It was thrown wide open, the moon shone through it, and she could see the stars far away; she heard a soft night breeze rustling the leaves, and from some tree near by she could hear the clear, silvery notes of a nightingale, but his song seemed to be an unutterably sad one. Sylvia lay there very quiet and still listening to the bird's plaintive notes. One soft, dimpled arm was thrown above her head, the two heavy braids of her glorious hair lying on the white coverlet. She breathed a little sigh, and whispered a passionate prayer to her Heavenly Father, “Dear Lord, if it be Thy will that I should live, I pray Thee teach me to cease to love him—I cannot live and bear it longer.”

CHAPTER XXVII

ONE afternoon, a few days later, Philip came. He found Sylvia alone, It was a glorious afternoon, the air was balmy, but not too warm.

"I wish," said Sylvia, as they sat on the verandah, "that there was something we could do. Why not take a walk? It is such a long time since I have taken a long walk; one drives and rides so much here, that walking is forgotten."

"I would like nothing better," said Philip, "shall we go down by the shore?"

"Yes," answered Sylvia.

It was some distance to the beach, but when they reached it, they strolled along the water's edge for several miles, the sand was so smooth and hard, they scarcely realised how far they were going. Presently they noticed that the sky, which had been so clear all day, had suddenly clouded over, they also heard thunder.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

“I fear there is going to be a heavy storm,” said Philip.

The clouds were gathering thick and fast above their heads and were large and dark; it had already begun to rain.

“You will be drenched,” said Philip, looking at Sylvia aghast.

“We are at least an hour’s distance from home and a half hour from any house.”

He looked about them eagerly to see if he could not discover some shelter. He saw some very large rocks near by, three of which seemed to form a cave.

“Come over to those rocks,” he said hurrying Sylvia towards them. He rolled in two smaller stones to serve as seats, and as the rocks met overhead it was as dry in this natural cave as if it had been a room.

Philip, in spite of his conscience pricking him a little at bringing her so far and allowing her to get caught in a storm, was unspeakably happy. In reality, now that it could not be

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

helped, he was extremely grateful to the storm for keeping them here and allowing him to sit beside her for an indefinite period—perhaps two or three hours! It was only three o'clock, it would take them only an hour to return, so they could wait at least two hours for the storm to pass.

Philip was watching Sylvia. He had never seen her look so lovely. Her hair curled about her face in the most bewitching manner from the dampness, she was a little pale, but it was from a wistfulness of expression, which was more becoming than a smile could be. The corners of her mouth drooped, and her eyes were moist with tears.

“What is it?” asked Philip gently.

She turned her head and looked at him without saying anything for a few moments.

“I do not think I know,” she answered at last, “I would like to be the rain and melt like tears.”

“I did not know that you could ever feel

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

sad," he said. "I have never seen you in this mood before—you have always been so joyful."

"Ah," said Sylvia, "can any one always be the same?"

"Yes," he replied slowly, thinking of himself. "I know some one who can. I have felt the same always—ever since that first day I saw you in Venice. I have loved you ever since, and I fear that I shall love you more every hour of my life. Can you not love me, dear? Won't you change your mind, and marry me?"

"I cannot," she answered simply.

"You can never love me?"

"I like you very much," she said, "but nothing more."

A sudden thought came to him. He must know.

"Do you love some one else?" he asked.

"I shall never marry," she said, avoiding a direct reply.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

"Never? You think so because you do not yet love any one, when you do, you will want to marry him. You are just the girl to be happy with some man—some man who could devote his life to you, who could care for you with all his strength, and worship you, who would try to make Heaven on Earth for you—if you could give yourself to him."

"Perhaps you are right," she said, "but that time will never come."

"Why? is your ideal so high? Can you not stoop to one of us poor men?"

"It is not that," she answered.

"Then if you are not looking for an ideal, why won't you marry me? If you like me, and say you shall never love any one, won't you marry me?"

"You would not want me if I could not give you my heart, would you?" said Sylvia, in wonderment.

"Yes, I want you desperately, even without your love. I want you so much, that I wish

SYLVIA: *The* STORY *of*

that I could carry you off by brute force.—I am strong and could do it if you would let me.”

“How strange!” she said. “I should think you would rather have some other girl who could give you her love.”

“No,” he answered, “you cannot understand how I love you, if you can think that.”

A great pity arose in Sylvia’s heart for the man sitting beside her. Did he love her then as she loved Eric? Was she more to him than all the rest of the world put together? How he must suffer!

She looked out at the rain; it seemed to shut her in, it seemed to be whispering to her that if she could not have happiness, why should she not give it? What was her life for? Would it not be more noble to make this sacrifice, than to go on, as she had, bringing joy and peace, to no one? It was a woman’s duty to bring joy and peace, and it seemed to her that she ought to do it now. Eric was lost to her; not

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

only did he not love her, but, as she now knew, he loved another. Philip asked for so little, why should she not make his life complete, as hers could never be? Surely out of the depths of her own heartache she could understand, as she had never done before, what his years of sorrow had been.

At last she spoke.

“I have been thinking that if—if you want me as I am, knowing that I do not love you, that I will marry you.”

For an instant Philip seemed unable to speak or move, his joy was so great at her words that it overpowered him. Then he took one of her hands reverently and tenderly and kissed it.

“You are an angel!” he said, “and I do not deserve it. But I shall pray God that I may make you happy.”

“I am sure that you will,” she said softly.

Then she was silent a moment—a little line came between her brows as if her thoughts troubled her. She drew in a deep breath and

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

spoke quickly, as if it hurt her, and she wanted to hurry.

“ But first—first I must tell you something. It has always seemed to me as if I could not bear to breathe it to a soul—but now it is different—it is only right that you should hear it. If I am going to be your wife, I ought to tell you, I cannot keep such a secret from you.”

“ Do not tell me, dear, if you would rather not.” he said. “ You must not feel that you *ought* to do anything. You are to do everything that makes you happy and nothing that would grieve you.”

“ Thank you, Philip,” she said. “ But this—yes, it would make me feel better if I told you. You are so big and sympathetic, I can confide my trouble in you and I know you will understand. You will not blame me, but will help me bear it? ”

“ I will try, dear heart,” he said.

“ It is this, Philip. It is that I—that I love

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

—that I have loved for a long time—some one—some one whom you know, but—but he does not love me.”

The confession was too much for her. She sank down from the stone to the ground sobbing.

He went quickly over to her and gently lifted her back again, drawing her tenderly toward him, and stroking her hair.

“It seems incomprehensible to me,” he said, “that there could be a man living who, knowing you, did not love you.”

His words were so full of genuine wonder that she was forced to smile in spite of her tears.

“It is not strange,” she said. “Of course there are many, many such men. And he is such a wonderful man—a genius—he spends all of his time in studying and reading and writing—and besides he cares—”

She stopped suddenly, her thoughts too bitter for utterance.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

“I can't possibly think who it is,” said Philip. “Would you tell me, or would you rather not?”

“It is Eric,” she whispered.

“By Jove, I should never have thought of him. Why, I could have sworn he adores you. He certainly showed it all last winter——”

“It was nothing,” interrupted Sylvia almost sternly, “we were merely friends, ordinarily good friends. I had absolutely no right to care for him—it was wrong in me.”

“Dear little girl,” said Philip, “how hard it is, that of all the men who adore you, you should care for the only one who does not. Perhaps it is wrong in me to ask you to marry me, if you think you would be happier free? He is sure to come to you sooner or later. Perhaps I ought to give you up? Oh, dearest, tell me what I ought to do. I love you so, I want you so—yet it is *your* happiness that I want, not mine.”

She looked up at him kindly.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“You need not give me up, Philip, it would do no good. He would never care for me—do not let us speak of him again. I might have thought so once, but I know better now, he cares for some one else who does not love him. Help me to forget him, God will help me too, for I have asked Him in my prayers. Let me feel that I may make you happy, and perhaps in that way I shall find peace. And now see, Philip,” she continued, rising, “the rain has stopped and the sun is shining again, we can go back now.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

WHEN they reached the villa they sat on the verandah watching the sun set. The world seemed very still, and a quiet had fallen on them both. Philip went over to the steps and stood looking out across the garden. He was greatly troubled; though unutterably happy at having Sylvia, he feared he ought not to let her make this sacrifice for him. He knew it was a sacrifice. What if Eric should come back, and should love her when it was too late? Sylvia sat very still, her breath was coming quickly and her eyes were very wide open—she was afraid—a sudden terrible fear had come over her. She had given her promise to Philip, she had decided that it was best to marry him—but she was conscious of a tremendous desire to beg him to release her. If she already longed so for her freedom, what would she

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

feel to-morrow and the next day and the next? She covered her face with her hands in an agony of dread and doubt for the future. But all at once she arose and gave herself a little shake; she would be strong, she would not let this fear undermine her determination—she would keep her promise to Philip. But her strength might not last long, her resolve might weaken, she dared not trust herself long. She went quickly over to Philip.

“I want to ask you, Philip,” she said, “if you will marry me now—at once? I am afraid—oh, forgive me for saying it—but you understand and will help me? When I am your wife, we can—we can forget it all—but I need you to help me. I am afraid to be left alone by myself. Are you willing to do this—to marry me at once?”

A great joy came over Philip—she had decided the question for him—he need no longer be troubled about what he ought to do. Once his wife, he felt he could teach her to forget.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

“Dearest!” he cried, “I long to marry you just as soon as you will let me—this very moment, if we could.”

A little smile crept about her mouth, his impetuosity could but please her.

“To-morrow is the nearest, Philip, we must have a little time to prepare. I must tell auntie, though I am sure that she will be willing. Let us make it to-morrow, and until then, until we are married and go away, let us keep it a secret. Let us be married in that pretty chapel at the edge of our woods. You have the priest there at twelve and I will ask aunt Lucia to come and we will meet you there. Do you like the plan?”

“I adore it!” said Philip, rapturously.

Philip stayed for a cup of tea, and afterwards they of course told the Baroness, who, though very much surprised, willingly gave her consent. She had always liked Philip, and of late, in her anxiety over Sylvia's altered looks and bearing, she had wondered if she might not be

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

in love, and now it was a great relief to her to find that she was.

“But why this haste?” she protested. “Why not have a large wedding fitting your station?”

“Oh, please, no!” said Sylvia. “I have always had a horror of those great functions. I would much prefer the simplest kind of a wedding, and both Philip and I see no reason to wait, we have set our hearts on being married to-morrow.”

The little chapel in the woods was a quaint, picturesque, deserted spot. It had not been in use for several years, so scarcely any one ever came near it.

The next noon when Sylvia and her aunt reached the place—they had walked, as they did not want even a coachman to know their destination—they found Philip and the priest already there. The noonday sun beat down warmly, but inside the little chapel it was cool and shady.

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

The ceremony took but a very few moments, When it was over, they all went back to the house. The priest had gone and returned to his own house having promised to keep the marriage a secret until he should hear of their departure.

That same noon Edith had been sitting in one of the cool salons of the hotel reading, when Dick's card was brought to her. He had come to ask her to go for a drive.

"It is rather early," he said, "but I wanted you to drive to Mentone and lunch. I met Eric on my way——"

Edith gave her a start, but Dick did not notice it.

"He has just returned from Egypt, and I told him to get Sylvia and come with us. He went over for her, but found she had just gone out."

Edith was very pale. For the first time in her life she was terrified. Eric had returned, when she supposed he was safely installed in

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

Egypt for at least a year or so! What if he discovered her monstrous lie? What if he loved Sylvia, told her so, and found it all out? . . . Of course he loved Sylvia, and of course he would find it out! Fate was once more against her! She shuddered.

She knew that if Eric's anger was once aroused—as she was sure it would be when he should discover her lie—and she dreaded the consequences! Dick was looking at her now and noticed her deathly whiteness.

“What is the matter?” he said, anxiously. “You look ill.”

“I have a terrible headache,” she said. “I could not sleep last night at all. I thought I was better, but it seems to be getting worse again. If you will excuse me, I fear that I cannot go with you.”

“Oh, certainly,” said Dick. “I am very sorry.” He rose to go. “May I come tomorrow to see how you are? I trust you will soon be well again.”

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

“ Thank you,” she said.

As soon as he had gone, she went quickly out and jumped into a coupé and told the coachman to take her to the Countess' villa. She had taken a sudden resolve. She would see Sylvia herself first—before Eric should have time to discover her falseness. She reached there just after they had returned from the chapel.

“ I know it is a strange hour for a call—just before luncheon—but I have something I want to tell you—at once,” said Edith. She was alone with Sylvia in her room, as Sylvia had been there and had asked Edith to come up.

“ I have a confession to make,” went on Edith. Whenever Edith had anything to say, whether pleasant or disagreeable, she never hesitated about saying it, and now, though never in her life had she made such a confession, she did not hesitate. One of Edith's redeeming features was her courage.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

“I lied to you the other day—most horribly.”

“I do not understand,” said Sylvia.

“It was about Eric Fielding. It is all over now, he has come back. Richard Ames saw him this morning, and so my plan is knocked out. I shall leave here immediately and never again try to meddle with his affairs. I loved him—Heaven alone knows how desperately—that is why I could not let him alone. If I could not hurt him, I wanted to hurt you, for I discovered that you loved him, I saw you kiss his picture, and I was horribly jealous, and I lied to you. He never loved me. He never cared for me in the very least. We were once engaged, it is true, but he did it to please me—I—I can say no more—I have confessed all. I know it is not enough punishment for the lie I told—but it is something—more than you can imagine.”

She had been standing, Sylvia had also, and now Edith turned toward the door. “I will

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

say good-bye, for I hope you will never see me again—and Eric—I trust he need never see me again. How you both must despise me! Do not come down with me, I cannot wait.” She went out so quickly and down the stairs to her coupé that Sylvia could not have escorted her if she had tried. But she was too astonished to move. She stood leaning against the foot of the bed. Then she knelt down by the side of it and buried her face in her hands.

“He does not love her then!” she cried. “Oh, thank Heaven, thank Heaven for that!” But the thought of Philip and the events of the morning came to her, and she arose wearily. Her despair was too deep for tears. After what had happened the knowledge that he did not love Edith was almost harder to bear than it had been before, for if it were not for the fact of her being Philip’s wife, a little hope that Eric loved her might have crept into her heart. But there was no room *now*—it was too late!

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

Edith had hastily shut the door after her, as she had left and presently Sylvia heard some one rap.

“Come in,” said Sylvia, drawing herself up and trying to look calm. Her maid Jeannette entered.

“This just came for you, Mademoiselle,” she said.

The maid handed Sylvia a box, courtesied and left the room.

Sylvia opened it and found a great bunch of violets with Eric’s card in it, on the back of which was written,

“I was so sorry not to find you in this morning. May I come again to-night?”

Sylvia uttered a little moan. There was a world of misery and utter despair in it.

“Oh, this is more than I can bear!” she sobbed, sinking into a chair and pressing the flowers against her face.

“‘May I come again to-night? May I

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

come again to-night?’ He asks me that—*he*—Eric!”

All at once she sprang up, at the sudden thought which had come to her, a thrill of delight ran through her whole being.

“Yes, he *shall* come to-night—and I will be at home! I have never refused him anything in all my life, and I will not refuse him this—his last request.”

She ran quickly downstairs to find Philip. He was seated in the library alone. When he saw Sylvia enter, he sprang up and went eagerly over to her. He wanted to take her in his arms, but he did not dare—he merely took her hand and kissed it again and again.

“My darling little wife!” he whispered, adoringly.

Sylvia checked herself, she had just been about to ask him something, but she thought she would wait a few moments.

They sat down and Philip talked to her, he was like a school-boy, so radiantly happy. But

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

finally Sylvia felt she must ask him the question which filled her heart.

“Philip, I want to know if you will grant me a request. I feel very guilty to ask it—I have no right, I ought not to—but, oh, I want to! I thought of it, and I was tempted to ask it—but it was only an impulse of mine—you need not grant it if you do not want to.”

“My dearest,” he said, “it is granted before you ask it. Anything you want you shall have, if I can give it to you.”

“Thank you, Philip, this is your permission I want.”

“Then you have my permission for anything. Though I am your husband, I am neither your lord nor your master, you need never feel that you must ask me for permission.”

“You are so good, Philip. You won’t think this very strange? You won’t blame me for thinking of wanting to do it? You will understand and will not feel hurt?”

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

“ I will understand, sweetheart, and will not feel hurt. How could I? Am I not the most blessed man in the whole world? ”

“ I want to know if you would mind if you do not take me away until to-morrow? If you will leave me here just this one more evening? It is because Eric is back and wants to see me—this evening. He got back this morning and wrote me a note asking me if he could—and the thought came to me that perhaps you might not mind if I stayed to see him once more.”

“ I understand,” said Philip. “ Surely you may stay. I want you to do everything that will give you pleasure. You can stay longer if you want to, and keep our marriage a secret as long as it may please you. You know, dearest, that I want you as soon as I can have you, but not until you are ready to come.”

“ Philip, you are so kind and good to me! ” said Sylvia, looking at him gratefully. “ You are so generous and true and noble. And I will go with you to-morrow. Come for me

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

early in the morning and we will go. I will say good-bye to Eric to-night. You do not blame me, do you, Philip?"

"You know I do not," he answered, "I quite understand."

CHAPTER XXIX

PHILIP remained with her during the afternoon, but left her about five o'clock, saying he would come the next morning.

Sylvia went up to her room to dress. She looked at each one of her gowns, wondering which one she would put on. She had a great many of them and they were all lovely, and she finally chose a white lace one; she always preferred to wear white. This one was made in a very simple style, yet of the richest and most exquisite lace. It was low-necked, with elbow sleeves, and was very long. It suited Sylvia's beauty to perfection.

"Perhaps it is a little too elaborate for such a simple visit," she said to herself, apologetically, "but I like it the best and I must wear it—for this is his last——" she leaned against a chair for a moment, for she felt faint and dizzy, but she quickly went on with her dress-

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

ing. She pinned some of his violets in her hair and the rest at her waist.

When finally eight o'clock came and Eric's card was brought up to her, she went down to the drawing-room at once. Eric had heard her footfall on the stair, and stood at the foot waiting for her. She gave him her hand, smiling. She told him how glad she was that he had returned. He thanked her, and then stood looking at her silently a moment. She had never before seen his eyes seem so dark, but she thought it must be because the room was so dimly lighted, there was only one lamp burning.

“It is such a beautiful night, shall we go out into the garden?” she said.

They went out and wandered down a path edged with tall rosebushes. Coming to a little bench, they sat there, both silent.

A nightingale was singing near by, but how joyous its song seemed now! Sylvia was enjoying to the utmost this one little short hour;

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

she felt that she must—for it would so soon be gone.

“It is just this evening,” she was saying to herself. “Just this one little evening.”

Eric interrupted her thoughts by speaking. He had leaned far back so that he could see her face.

“In Egypt,” he said, “as you know, there is a great desert—miles and miles of loneliness and desolation—that is the place I have been in for the last few months—I could see nothing but that vast stretch of misery. I was lost there—and so I came back—to you. Three years ago there was a man who went out to California. He had supposed it was on business, but he knew afterwards that it was Fate who drew him there. When he reached there, he met a girl and the first hour that he saw her he knew that he loved her wholly and entirely. She played to him on the violin one night, the first thing she played was Werner’s Farewell, and as he listened to it, he felt that the message

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

of the song was for him a prediction of his own destiny, for he was to love her and never be able to tell her—he was engaged to be married. But finally he was freed from his engagement and he returned, but to find that she was dead. He had given her his whole heart, though she knew it not, though she did not care for him in the least, nor had she given him one thought. He had nothing left but to wait till he could join her after death, and in the meantime he wanted to do something for her sake. So he wrote a book—several books—and tried to make himself a little better than the average man, he wanted to be as nearly worthy of loving her as he could. But at last, in three years, he met another girl—she was nearly a woman and she had all the beauty and exquisite graces of his lost love, only ten-fold more. He loved her as even he had never dreamed of loving the other. But he felt that he could not tell her so because he had believed it impossible that he could love two women. His only excuse was

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

that they were so exactly alike. The first time he had seen her he believed she was the same—until he found it was impossible. So he made up his mind to go away and conquer that love. He fought long and earnestly, but it was useless. Countess, that woman is yourself—and I am that man. I love you with my whole heart and strength and being!”

Sylvia arose and stood looking at him. Eric arose also looking at her, his soul in his eyes. Sylvia was spell-bound. Joy, sorrow, and terror were written in her face—though he could not read their meaning.

“Tell me,” he said, in a low voice, “what is it? I cannot endure this suspense any longer. Do you love me—can you love me?”

At last she spoke.

“You did not tell me before. Why did you not tell me before?”

“Because,” he said, “I have been fighting against my love. I have always believed a man could not love twice as I have loved you. But

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

Heaven forgive me for my disloyalty to her. I love you so that even she is forgotten. I could stand it no longer before telling you. And I believe Heaven must have forgiven me now, for I have suffered so."

She was breathing hard.—"Come," she whispered. She turned and hurried toward the house. He followed her in silent obedience. She led him to the picture gallery, at the door she paused.

"Wait here just a moment," she said, stepping by him into the darkened room. She went over to where two tall candlesticks stood, and lighting the candles in them, she returned. She led Eric over to a chair opposite to the window with the steps, turning the chair so that the back was towards the room.

"Sit here, she said. "And do not stir nor speak nor move,"

He obeyed her again in mute astonishment.

She went over to the window and threw open the casement. Taking her violin, she

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

stood on the top step and began to play. It was Werner's Farewell. The clear, rich notes drifted over to him on the warm fragrant air as they had done that night so long ago.

Eric sprang to his feet.

"Barbara!" he cried. "You are Barbara, you must be—no one else could play like that!"

He sprang across the room. She had ceased playing and stood there triumphant, a glorious light in her eyes.

"I am Barbara," she said.

He was up the steps and had her in his arms. She gave a dear little, low, sweet laugh—her spirit seemed lifted above all earthly happiness to a radiance found only in Heaven. Life to her was entirely this one moment.

"Do you love me?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered, "I love you as you love me,—and I am both Barbara and Sylvia. Now you see you are forgiven for loving two of us—for we are one and the same."

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

"It is marvellous!" he said. "But how could I have been so blind? I might have known that Heaven could not have made two such beings. And yet—I do not understand—I have believed Barbara dead. She was in America . . . you are here. . . ."

"It is strange," said Sylvia. "But I was in America and I had taken my mother's name for the time being. My uncle had an accident which affected his brain and he believed me dead and must have told you so—when in reality I was here."

Eric pressed her closer to him.

"It is wonderful," he said, "I cannot comprehend it, but nothing matters now that I have you! So I have loved you, and you only all these years! Ah, God is good to me. Tell me again," he said.

"I love you, and have loved you always," whispered Sylvia.

"Then you are my own," he said. "God has given you to me. I believe that I have

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

loved you through countless ages and I know I shall throughout eternity to come."

Suddenly a tumult of thoughts—terrible, stern and real—came to Sylvia's remembrance. And, as her whole life and joy had been thrown into this one supreme moment of time—when it had passed—when the next moment had succeeded it—a cold shudder passed through her frame. She had lived . . . and now she must pay for it. For nothing in life is without its price.

"Listen," she said, "I love you—Heaven knows how I love you—and God help me, for I shall love you forever—but—but—wait——" She hesitated, sobs choked her voice. "Oh, Eric, how can I tell you? It breaks my heart."

"What is it?" he whispered. "Do not tremble so, darling, nothing can come to you now to sadden you—now that you love me and I have the right to protect you."

"But that is it—ah, you do not understand. I must tell you, I cannot wait another moment

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

—but it tortures me so! I do not—I cannot—I never could love Philip—but—but we are married!”

“Married?” cried Eric. “Impossible, you must be dreaming.”

He put his hand up to his head and pushed the hair back from his forehead. Sylvia laid hers too against his forehead.

“No, dear, alas, I am not dreaming. See, take my hand.” The anguish in his eyes terrified her. “We are real—we are here together—it is not a dream—and I love you—you must remember this ever—for it will always be the same, even though we can never speak of it again. And you must leave me now, I am his wife and I have promised to go with him tomorrow, we were married this morning.”

“This morning?” said Eric. “My God, if I had but known!”

“Yes,” said Sylvia, “if you had only known, but now—it is too late.”

SYLVIA : *The* STORY *of*

“But if you loved me, why did you marry Philip?” he asked.

“Because, you see, I did not believe you loved me. I thought that I could make Philip happy by being his wife, even if I did not love him. I told him quite frankly that I loved you. Philip has been so good, and seemed to want me so, I thought it was the best thing I could do with my life—and I married him quickly so that I should not change my mind and break my promise. But, oh, if I had only known—if I had only waited just one day more——”

She ceased speaking. Eric had stood motionless listening to her. A great exhaustion suddenly overpowered him and he sank down, and buried his head in his hands.

Sylvia knelt beside him.

“Dearest,” she whispered, tenderly stroking his hair. “Dearest,” she repeated over and over again. His misery rent her heart. She forgot her own anguish in seeing his suffering.

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

After a few moments she arose, and said, "Let us be brave and accept our fate. It is too late now to alter anything. I must go with Philip to-morrow, and if we ever meet again, even though we cannot speak of it, we shall *know*—that will be our comfort—we shall always know—nothing can take that from us. My heart belongs to you, even if I cannot—keep it, dear."

He arose slowly, and looked at her again, an unutterable sadness in his eyes. He took her hand gently and kissed it.

"I will," he said, solemnly. "Heaven bless you for giving it to me. And Heaven guard you. I will go," he continued, "but remember, sweetheart, that I am yours wholly, truly and entirely, in this world, in the next, and forever."

He pressed her hand again to his lips.

"Yes, I will remember," she said. She went close to him.

"Kiss me good-bye," she whispered. "It

SYLVIA : *The* STORY of

cannot be wrong, for it is all that we have granted us. And then leave me."

He kissed her, slowly and solemnly, and then turned, leaving her standing there in the dimly-lighted room.

When he reached the garden, he found that the heavens had clouded over, the moon and stars had disappeared, there was lightning and thunder in the distance, and heavy drops of rain were beginning to fall. As he passed along under the room where he had been with her, he looked up at the window, but all was darkness, so he passed out to the open lawn, through the gateway and on towards home. The wind which came in through the open window behind Sylvia suddenly put out the flickering flames of the candles, and left the room in darkness. But this was unheeded, for she had fallen to the floor, and lay there with her eyes closed. The storm drew nearer and nearer, the rain was coming down in torrents now, the flashes of the lightning were brilliant

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

and the continuous rolling of the thunder was almost appalling. Sylvia opened her eyes—the rain was coming in upon her as she lay there. She arose to her feet, stepping to the window a moment to look out on the storm. Storms were so rare in the countries in which her life had been spent that they never had lost the power to awe her, and it seemed particularly fitting to her that one should come now at this supreme crisis of her life. But it almost seemed too terrible to watch longer. She hastily closed the shutters, and groping her way to the door, she hurried to her own room.

CHAPTER XXX

PHILIP had sat that whole evening at his window. It looked out across the broad avenue to the sea beyond. He had idly watched the stars and the moon, the light playing on the water below, the rustling of the leaves and the swaying of the flowers in the gentle evening breeze, and the people passing to and fro.

His thoughts had been most happy, for his heart was filled with Sylvia's dear image; he was trying to realise the blessed truth that she was his. To-morrow he would take her with him into a wonderful land where they would live all their lives together. Though she was spending the evening with some one else, even the man she loved, it did not occur to Philip to feel any jealousy, his joy was so great in thinking of the morrow.

As he watched the night outside, he saw the change come over the heavens. The storm fascinated him, and he felt a delight in its

An AMERICAN COUNTESS

power, in listening to the thunder and watching the flashes of light. He let the rain beat against his face, it felt refreshing and cool, so warm was his blood for the gladness in his soul that the cold drops were grateful to him.

Never in his life had he felt such a deep, pure joy, and content. He had waited and longed for years for that which had finally been given him. He suddenly had a great desire to go out into the storm, the room seemed too small to hold his joy. He left the hotel and wandered towards Sylvia's villa. Instinctively he longed to be as near her as possible, to look at the house which held her, to watch it all through the night, until morning should come when he could go to her. He drew near and looked up at the stone facade. "Somewhere behind that wall is my sweetheart—my wife. I wonder in which room," he whispered.

His eyes wandered along the row of dark windows. While he gazed, as if in answer to his longing, he saw by a sudden, unusually

SYLVIA: *The* STORY of

vivid flash of lightning, the face of his love appear for a second at one of the windows above. But, as it must happen in this world, the answer to our prayers comes in a way, and at a cost we little dream of, and the kindly stroke which had served as a beacon to guide his eyes to the face dearest to his heart, was followed by another that served also to close his eyes forevermore on all other visions. Like a kindly hand which held a torch, it touched him gently on the shoulder, as if to awaken him from a dream. He sank slowly to the ground. On his face the smile of infinite content, as if the happiness of his thoughts had been so great that even death itself had no power to mar their sweetness. Then there was a great and solemn hush—a darkness—and nothing but the steady downpour of the rain.

THE END.

A Romance of the Iowa Wheat Fields.

THE ROAD TO RIDGEBY'S.

By FRANK BURLINGAME HARRIS.

12mo, cloth, decorative.

\$1.50

A simple but powerful story of farm life in the great West, which cannot fail to make a lasting impression on every reader. In this book Mr. Harris has done for the wheat fields what Mr. Westcott has done for rural New York and Mr. Bacheller for the North country. It is in no way imitative of *David Harum* or *Eben Holden*; and, unlike each of these books, it is not in the portrayal of a single quaint character that its power consists. Mr. Harris has taken for his story a typical Iowa farmer's family and their neighbours; and, although every one of the characters is realistically portrayed, the sense of proportion is never lost sight of, and the result is a picture of real life, artistic in the highest sense, as being true to nature. It is a wholesome story, full of the real heroism of homely life, a book to make the reader better by strengthening his belief in the truth of self-sacrifice and the survival of sturdy American character.

"One has but to read the book to realize what a loss was sustained in his death. The morbidness of approaching death has not entered into the story in any way. It is strong, healthy, normal. It appeals to the best emotions in its kindly human interest, and mingles genial homely humor with its pathos."—*St. Louis Globe-Democrat*.

"Contrasting it with the work of the others who have wrought in the Iowa vineyard, one comes to the conclusion that *The Road to Ridgeby's* lies nearest the truth, and is, consequently, the best art. I do not laud *The Road to Ridgeby's* above *Main Travelled Roads* simply because it is a pleasanter road. It is simply and unmistakably the truer, the more natural, the nearer to the real life of the Iowa plains. That life has its shadows, but it has its lights also. Mr. Harris gives us both."—*The Mirror (St. Louis)*.

"Praise it certainly deserves; for it has kindly and simply humor, honest but not oppressive realism, and a genuine faculty for character realization."—*The Outlook*.

"His pictures of Western country life and people are wonderfully real in every detail."—*Minneapolis Journal*.

"One cannot read this book carefully without being caught by its charm, its earnestness, and its truthfulness, and strongly held in its power. It is unquestionably one of the best novels of the year and an addition to American literature that will live."—*Town and Country*.

"Simple as the tale is, an idyl of love, and a story of sublime sacrifice, it has no uninteresting moment. From the time when the new arrival comes to the community, and becomes beloved by its people by whipping the town bully until old Ridgeby's struggles are ended and Sibley finds her reward, one is held as children are when they listen to some old fairy story."—*Chicago Journal*.

For sale by all booksellers, or sent, postpaid, by the publishers on receipt of price.

**Small, Maynard & Company, PIERCE BUILDING
COPLEY SQ., BOSTON**

As Curious and as Novel as its Title.

ANTING - ANTING STORIES,

And Other Strange Tales of the Filipinos.

By SARGENT KAYME.

With cover design by WILLIAM MATHER CROCKER.

12mo, cloth.

\$1.25

The sub-title to this volume gives a suggestion of the nature of the stories of which it is composed, but no title can give an adequate idea of their wonderful variety and charm. It is hardly exaggeration to say that Mr. Kayme's treatment of the life of the Filipinos opens to our literature a new field, almost as fresh and as original as did Mr. Kipling's Indian Stories when they first appeared. Like Mr. Kipling, he shows his perfect familiarity with the country and people he describes; and he knows how to tell a good story straight away and simply without any sacrifice of dramatic effect or power.

The curious title to the volume furnishes the motive for some of the most striking of the stories. *Anting-Anting* is a Filipino word, used to denote anything worn as an amulet, with a supposed power to protect the life of the wearer. Often a thing of no intrinsic value, the belief in its efficacy is yet so real that its owner often braves death with a confidence so sublime as to command admiration, if not respect.

"As stories they are excellent in themselves, but they are even more valuable as an exposition of the peculiarities and actualities of life among the Filipinos."—*Boston Transcript*.

"The tales are told with exceptional dramatic power and picturesqueness."—*Buffalo Express*.

"Mr. Kayme knows his Filipino. He has written well, and the collection of stories is of more than ordinary interest."—*Louisville Courier Journal*.

"There are eleven stories in all, and he who reads one will want to read all the others."—*Knoxville Sentinel*.

"They are of more importance to the American reader than any story of Rajput or Manchurian, Japanese or Afghan, or any other race as to which he has no responsibility. It is his business to know the Filipino, and he is fortunate in the form in which the knowledge is presented to him."—*Boston Journal*.

"The book is potent with promise of the riches of material lying loose within the Philippine Islands and awaiting the story-tellers. The sketches in this volume are well handled and rich in suggestion."—*The Outlook*.

"They bring the people and places before us as no mere description could possibly do."—*Chicago Daily News*.

For sale by all booksellers, or sent, postpaid, by the publishers on receipt of price.

Small, Maynard & Company, PIERCE BUILDING
COPLEY SQ., BOSTON

A Great American Novel of the Civil War.

THE GRAPES OF WRATH.

A Tale of North and South.

By MARY HARRIOTT NORRIS,

Author of *The Gray House of the Quarries*, etc.

12mo, cloth, decorative, with six full-page illustrations
by H. T. CARPENTER.

\$1.50

A really great American novel of the Civil War, which will appeal with equal force to-day to the Southern as well as to the Northern reader. The title is, of course, suggested by Mrs. Howe's line,—

"He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored."

The story is developed from the fortunes, amid the vicissitudes of war, of an old New Jersey family, one son of which had settled in Virginia, becoming a general in Lee's army. There is little fighting and no cheap heroics in the book, but it gives a clearer picture and a more intimate and impressive understanding of what the great struggle really meant to Unionist and to Confederate alike than many a military history.

"The story is an unusually powerful one. Apart from the broad opportunities given to interpret history, there is admirable development of character shown throughout the book; and the romance element is well handled. The book is impressive and artistic."—*The Dial*.

"It will take its place forthwith among the best of novels dealing with the Civil War. In breadth of sympathy, it may be said to surpass them all."—*Chicago Tribune*.

"A notably good novel of the Civil War period,—in some respects one of the best. One of the most striking pictures in the book is the description of the battle of the Wilderness, and of equal merit are the scenes in Richmond before the surrender, the night of pillage by the mob, and the gathering of plundering negroes in the abandoned mine in the wilderness. Its minor errors may well be overlooked in the interest of the book and the sympathy and fairness with which it is written."—*Louisville Courier Journal*.

"The story as a whole is highly dramatic and well sustained. It is full of spirit, life, and verisimilitude, and the difference between the point of view in small matters North and South gives life and piquancy to the whole."—*The Outlook*.

"A vital, interesting, and well-written story. A book well worth reading."—*Chicago News*.

"The war scenes are well handled. Miss Norris sees whole battlefields with excellent fulness of imaginative power."—*St. Paul Dispatch*.

"A novel to which high praise must be accorded. In its picture of what the war meant to women, it is a powerful and tragic story, quite as worthy of a large circle of readers as *The Crisis*."—*Springfield Republican*.

For sale by all booksellers, or sent, postpaid, by the publishers on receipt of price.

Small, Maynard & Company, PIERCE BUILDING
COPLEY SQ., BOSTON

MONONIA.

By JUSTIN MCCARTHY, M.P.,

Author of *A History of Our Own Times, Dear Lady Disdain*, etc.
12mo, green cloth and gold. **\$1.50**

Mr. McCarthy has written several successful novels; but none, perhaps, will have greater interest for his American readers than this volume, in which he writes reminiscently of the Ireland of his youth and the stirring events which marked that period.

It is pre-eminently an old-fashioned novel, befitting the times which it describes, and written with the delicate touch of sentiment characteristic of Mr. McCarthy's fiction. The book takes its name from the heroine, a charming type of the gentle-born Irish-woman. In the development of the romance, the attempts for Ireland's freedom, and the dire failures that culminated at Ballynary, are told in a manner which give an intimate insight into the history of the *Young Ireland* movement. If the book cannot be considered autobiographical, the reader will not forget that the author was contemporary with the events described, and will have little difficulty in perceiving that many of the principal characters are strongly suggestive of the Irish leaders of that day, which gives the book scarcely less value than an avowed autobiography.

"Mononia is drawn with all Mr. McCarthy's ancient skill."
London Outlook.

"Beautiful in every sense is this 'Mononia.' It is a work that we could expect from no other author, for it is largely reminiscent. So, besides its attractiveness as a romance, the book is attractive as an informal historical document. Read in either of these lights, it will be found delightful."—*Boston Journal.*

"Altogether a good story. . . . Mononia is full of beauty, tenderness, and that sweet and wholesome common sense which is so refreshing when found in a woman."—*The Pilot* (Boston).

"The description of the affection of Mononia and Philip is a piece of literary splendor."—*Boston Courier.*

"For those who would reject its historical and autobiographic phase, there remains the old-fashioned love romance, full of fine Irish spirit, which is always refreshing."—*Mail and Express.*

For sale by all booksellers, or sent, postpaid, by the publishers on receipt of price.

Small, Maynard & Company, PIERCE BUILDING
COPLEY SQ., BOSTON

An Indian "Tom Brown at Rugby."

THE MIDDLE FIVE

Indian Boys at School.

By FRANCIS LA FLESCHÉ.

With a colored frontispiece and a cover decoration by Angel de Cora. 12mo, cloth. \$1.25

The author of this book is a full-blooded Omaha Indian, a graduate of the National University Law School at Washington and a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, now holding a responsible position in the Indian Bureau at Washington. He has written in this volume a remarkable series of sketches of the life of young Indians in a mission school established in 1857 by the Presbyterian Church on the eastern boundary of the Omaha reservation. The volume is largely reminiscent of the author's own school-days, and Mr. La Flesché announces that the object of his book is to reveal the true nature and character of the Indian boy.

"A book as new as can be, echoing nothing whatever, dealing with a phase of life that nobody else has dealt with, . . . valuable because it is simple, direct, honest, and at the same time picturesque, and because it deals with a big and bitter question,—the question how the American Indian is to pass from his state of original freedom to that of subservience to the requirements of European civilization in its American expression."—*Boston Transcript*.

"Any boy worthy of the name must delight in it."—*Rebecca Harding Davis*.

"To the thoughtful reader these sketches possess a psychological interest which cannot be described. The book must needs be read to be understood."—*Springfield Union*.

"A story that deserves a place among classics for children."—*Chicago Post*.

"There is in this book a double interest, that of the text, which is full of interest, and also the fact that we are receiving Indian literature and Indian thought from an educated mind which yet cherishes with pride all the traditions and incentives of his people. The stories are told in the most simple words, tersely and yet elegantly and pointedly."—*Chicago Inter-Ocean*.

"Deserves the attention of all who care to know more of the red men of America."—*San Francisco Argonaut*.

"A veritable storehouse of delight for boys of all sizes and of every class. Nor will the enjoyment of the book be confined to the youthful members of the family."—*Southern Workman*.

"Should be in every boy's library."—*Brighton (Eng.) Herald*.

For sale by all booksellers, or sent, postpaid, by the publishers on receipt of price.

Small, Maynard & Company, PIERCE BUILDING
COPLEY SQ., BOSTON

Two Notable Novels by Emma Rayner.

VISITING THE SIN

A Tale of Mountain Life in Kentucky and Tennessee.

12mo, cloth, with cover designed by T. W. BALL. 448 pages. **\$1.50**

The struggle between the heroine's love and her determination to visit the sin upon the son of the supposed murderer of her father forms the basis of the story. All of the characters are vividly drawn, and the action of the story is wonderfully dramatic and lifelike. The period is about 1875.

"A powerful, well-sustained story, the interest in which does not flag from the first chapter to the last."—*Philadelphia North American*.

"Unusually powerful. The dramatic plot is intricate, but not obscure."—*The Congregationalist*.

"A graphic and readable piece of fiction, which will stand with the best of its time concerning humble American characters."—*Providence Journal*.

"Far ahead of most of these latter-day Southern novels."—*Southern Star*.

"The people in the story are persistently real."—*Christian Advocate*.

FREE TO SERVE

A Tale of Colonial New York.

12mo, cloth, with a cover designed by MAXFIELD PARRISH.

434 pages.

\$1.50

"One of the very best stories of the Colonial period yet written."—*Philadelphia Bulletin*.

"We have here a thorough-going romance of American life in the first days of the eighteenth century. It is a story written for the story's sake, and right well written, too. Indians, Dutch, Frenchmen, Puritans, all play a part. The scenes are vivid, the incidents novel and many."—*The Independent*.

"The writing is cleverly done, and the old-fashioned atmosphere of old Knickerbocker days is reproduced with such a touch of verity as to seem an actual chronicle recorded by one who lived in those days."—*Saturday Evening Post*, Philadelphia.

"The supreme test of a long book is the reading of it, and when one reaches the end of *Free to Serve*, he acknowledges freely that it is the best book that he has taken up for a long time."—*Boston Herald*.

For sale by all booksellers, or sent, postpaid, by the publishers on receipt of price.

Small, Maynard & Company, PIERCE BUILDING
COPLEY SQ., BOSTON

